Bagh-e Bi-Bargi: Aspects of Time and Presence in the Poetry of Mehdi Akhavan Sales

BĀGH-E BI-BARGI:
ASPECTS OF TIME AND PRESENCE
IN THE POETRY OF MEHDI AKHAVĀN SĀLES

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MARIE DENISE HUBER

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ABSTRACT

Mehdi Akhavān Sāles (1928-1990) is one of the most important figures in modern Persian literature. However, his poetry is little known in the West. Even in Iran, though held in high regard, his work is considered hermetic. There is no unambiguous message, no identifiable political or aesthetic doctrine. Still, his poems exert a strange, haunting power. What do they tell us, now, two decades after the poet's death? What do they mean outside their homeland? What is their voice in world literature?

These are the questions my dissertation seeks to answer. Chapters on rhythm, metaphor, time and – lyric and epic – voice aim to place Akhavān in the comparative context of 20th century literary movements. Following the philosophical hermeneutics of, above all, Paul Ricœur, I attempt to tease out layers of meaning and bring Akhavān's poems to life for a contemporary reader. Aspects of time and presence throughout serve to structure my argument. In parallel, time and presence are traced as motifs that weave through Akhavān's writing. Through close readings of a wide range of poems I seek to understand Akhavān's texts as crystallisations of a historical moment. However, I also argue that his poems can no longer be explained within the linear evolution of Persian literary history: in their language and imagery, they point to an elsewhere that has not yet been mapped.

Akhavān avoids ideological statements and political imperatives. All the same, an ethical stance is manifest in his poetry. Form itself takes on significance. Chapter 1 examines how Akhavān makes the human time of rhythm converge with the time of the poem. Chapter 2 explores how definitions of metaphor affect the belief in literature's potential to describe and refigure reality. Chapter 3 elucidates the processes by which time is imagined as an unattainable space. Hope and desire belong elsewhere, as does salvation. Chapter 4 treats the genres of lyric and epic as distinct configurations of time. Akhavān's love poetry is a poetry of absence, reaching out to an elusive Other, while his narrative poems adumbrate the possibility of a different, gladder history in the interstices of language.

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in memory of my mother, Ingeborg Huber

to Mortezā Kākhi, *l'insoumis*...

شکر پر اشکم نثارت باد

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★

my profound gratitude goes out to

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to

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★

INTRODUCTION

Interpréter c'est prendre le chemin de pensée ouvert
par le texte, se mettre en route vers l'*orient* du texte.

Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*

On 7 Farvardin 1337 (27 March 1958) Mehdi Akhavān Sāles despatched a letter to a friend and aspiring poet. The letter is long and dazzling in its stylistic virtuosity, full of wordplay and allusions, exhausting all registers from high literariness to satirical mockery and street slang. As if in passing, Akhavān describes an encounter with a well-known translator of the time.[1] Asked about the languages he spoke, German, French, English or Arabic, Akhavān's answer is, "Only a smattering of Persian." But the translator insists, "No, you're lying! You must have at least some knowledge of foreign languages. Your work shows an intimate familiarity with Western poetry. There can be no doubt that you have studied Hesse and George, because you write very much like them." How to take such a statement? Akhavān with typical mischievousness remarks to his friend that Hesse, what Hesse, the author of *Demian* also wrote verse? Besides, he had never heard of George and, in any case, thought Western poetry did not command the same vast horizon as the Persian tradition. Unless, of course, the fault lay with translations and only anodyne poems had found their way across the border.

[1] Qahramān 167–168. The letter is addressed to Hoseyn Rāzi (Purhoseyni) and the translator mentioned is Parviz Dāryush, whose translations include novels by James Joyce, Hermann Hesse, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, André Gide, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Vladimir Nabokov. • Significantly, Akhavān in the same passage expresses his admiration for Western novelists, above all Dostoevsky, Balzac and Stendhal. Also, throughout Akhavān's other writings, Kafka keeps being invoked.

While we should allow for a measure of exaggeration and writerly coquetry, the anecdote nevertheless illustrates an important point: Akhavān, unlike most of his contemporaries, had little regard for intellectual fashions and did not seek inspiration abroad. At the same time – and here the translator's intuition was astute – Akhavān's poetry is most profoundly rooted in our age. Its scope and depth transcend the national boundaries of Iran. Yet, can we hasten to apply the Western label and speak of a *modern* writing? Or rather of pertinence and reflection, of a poetry that enacts the dilemmas of modernity in its quests and aporias, feats of linguistic prowess and lapses into silence, heteroglossia and unadorned simplicity, desire and disillusionment, alienation and belief in an improbable humanity buried amid the ruins of history? This is the question my thesis addresses. On the way towards possible answers there will be theoretical reflections on rhythm and metaphor as the two elements on which poetic language necessarily rests. Tradition and modernity are played out here. Later, close readings of Akhavān's poems aim to elucidate the texts themselves. More precisely, I shall set out to follow the path of thought opened up by the texts, guided by them and, in turn, departing towards places that are still unknown. Aspects of time and presence throughout will serve to structure my argument. In parallel, time and presence will also be traced as motifs that weave through Akhavān's writing.

For my approach, I am most profoundly indebted to Paul Ricœur, whose thought is ever mindful of historical distances and the fragility of the human condition. Ricœur's studies on metaphor (*La métaphore vive*) and narrative time (*Temps et récit*) are foundational in their fields and will be referred to throughout the following chapters. In a highly complex and rich œuvre spanning sixty years, Ricœur elaborates the principles of a phenomenological hermeneutics. He holds that all knowledge of self is mediated by signs, symbols and texts (*Soi-même comme un autre*). Thinking is a dialogical ethics that

oscillates between text and self (*Du texte à l'action*). From here, a double responsibility takes its origin: the human being becomes *l'homme capable*, called upon to take responsibility for his or her actions. In fact, action and text (as discourse) are considered analogous. Based on this premise, the hermeneutic praxis comes to be thought as a mode of being in the world and as such carries the potential to effect change.

Beyond Ricœur but still within the phenomenological tradition, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Michel de Certeau and Jacques Derrida have at various points shaped my argument. These thinkers with all their difference share a humility before the text that is profoundly rooted in the experience of the past century: the ethical turn of philosophy after the war was marked by a mistrust of totalising mechanisms and an awareness of the vulnerability of the human Other. For Levinas, *autrui* is the undeniable reality of a face but also a figure of language, interpellating a reader. Similarly, *cheminement* for de Certeau is a practice of approaching or, rather, of moving through a text, without succumbing to fantasies of panoptic control. Finally, *le dehors* for Blanchot is an outside that cannot be reduced and forever eludes habitual categories of thought and being. Even though part of a different intellectual space, the spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin will also be present throughout the thesis. Above all, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism – akin to Ricœur's belief that all discourse is inherently dialogical – will be made to bear on Akhavān's narrative poems: poems which, in their highly heteroglot structure, extend well beyond the confines of the epic to approach what Bakhtin calls the novelistic. Finally, two figures hover in the background as guardian spirits: Walter Benjamin and Peter Szondi. Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* with their idea of the historical moment as disjointed, blasted out of the temporal continuum and imbued with the *now* of a perceiving, interpreting "I" remain the conceptual ground for all mediation on the past.

Alongside Benjamin, Szondi is a necessary presence. His literary hermeneutics emerges from a tradition that can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher and thus feeds from the same source as Ricœur. In his *Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis* Szondi expounds a way of reading on which all literary scholarship should be based, above all, however, scholarship that engages non-Western traditions. The principles of literary hermeneutics set forth by Szondi encompass the interpreting subject, the reader's distance to the text and the historicity of the text. For Szondi – as for Ricœur, Gadamer or de Certeau – the interpretation of texts corresponds to a praxis: there can be no method or external structure imposed on the act of reading, an act that proceeds in spirals and is always attended by reflections on the critical labour itself. As interpretation is incessantly questioned so too is the place of the interpreting subject. Hermeneutics knows of the unbridgeable historical, geographic or, more generally, existential distance that separates the reader from the text. Instead of pleading an allegedly neutral middle ground, interpretation enacts a constant dialectics between presence and distance. Facing the reader are the text and the question of its historicity, the question also of the "I" that speaks in the text. For Szondi, every work of art is located in a tripartite force field of past (the conditions of possibility of a text's emergence: poetic forms, genres, etc.), present (artistic realisation) and future (the utopian horizon of a belated maturation). The negation of subjectivity is replaced by a desire to trace the historical conditions of perception. The very same, fundamentally Benjaminian desire also leads the reader to relinquish the critical vantage point through which an illusion of objectivity is erected. Instead, there is a wish to write not *on* the texts but *with* them, "im Nachvollzug nämlich ihres Geschriebenseins."[2]

[2] Szondi 1975a, 16–17; also, 1975b, 129–130.

Apart from the works of Western philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, I draw on the essays on poetry and poetics written by Akhavān and, before him, Nimā Yushij. Lastly, studies on Akhavān by Iranian scholars are the third pillar on which my argument rests.

Throughout the thesis and while trying to understand the historicity of Akhavān's poems as it is manifested in the texts themselves, I shall take care not to let the political and ethical stakes of Akhavān's writing slip out of view.

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Beyond the matter of influence and intellectual indebtedness, a further question needs to be asked: in what kind of tradition does the project of my thesis stand, what are its conditions of possibility in terms of previous scholarship? Almost within living memory, there are the towering figures of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who can be seen as the founding fathers of modern comparative literature and embody a history which, in a way, is also mine. Auerbach and Spitzer belonged to a Central European space of thought: a space that experienced a brutal rupture and intellectual diaspora. With the calamity of World War II, comparative literature as a discipline became different. Central Europe had once existed as a real space of thought where multilingualism was a daily experience and a Jew like Franz Kafka could write an oddly floating, atemporal and excentric German among a Czech speaking majority in Prague. Thought happened naturally across national and linguistic borders. With the disjunction of war the real space was transfigured into a virtual space of scholarship that gradually began to reach out to languages and literatures outside the Western canon. While Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* in Istanbul without ever mastering the language of his exile, he carried an

approach, a manner of reading, to the fault-line between Europe and Asia. On the Bosphorus, a space was opened up in which languages and literatures could be thought and studied in relation to each other.

Then, there is the matter of orientalism. Where to place a thesis on a contemporary Iranian poet? Does it belong to a national literature or to the field of oriental and regional studies? The only valid framework is, I believe, that of literature. Oriental studies were ideologically and academically fraught even before Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Halfway through the 20th century, the discipline had turned into a side branch, cut off from with its vital force: the main stream of the humanities. Scholars of that vast and vague territory called the Orient – a designation on which the Western perspective is already inscribed – had largely ceased to follow developments in historiography, literary criticism, linguistics or philosophy, the most foundational branch of thought. Not much remained of a splendid tradition that had emerged from the Romantic questioning of language and origins (J. G. Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and the brothers Schlegel): a tradition, also, that had brought forth scholar-poets like Goethe or Friedrich Rückert, who would today be seen as comparatists.

If Persian literature is to be studied in a comparative context the last traces of the orientalist gaze must be removed: a gaze that is both aloof and passes judgement, from an ostensible place of safety. For the sake of an emancipated and balanced scholarship, specialisation should no longer happen within a geographic region but a disciplinary field. Only then can there be a shared language between international scholars and scholars in the respective countries. Inherent in the field of regional studies is an insidious danger, very much attenuated today but still there in traces. Fundamentally one-directional, the objectifying gaze is perpetuated as an interiorised orientalism into the way national literatures view themselves. To short-circuit this process, the study of

disciplines – history, literature, linguistics, philosophy, etc. – should be furthered within a specific national context and supersede the study of a region and subsequent choice of a disciplinary focus. In the course of such a shift, the range of comparatives would naturally expand: within a field of comparative history or comparative literature several histories or literatures would be studied. By the same token, national and international scholars would be positioned at equal distance to their disciplines, regardless of hierarchies or hegemonic orders. Academic answerability would likewise be more evenly distributed and scholarly work produced internationally would no longer be entrenched in an attitude of superiority or rivalry to scholarship arising in the national context. Instead, a true dialogue could begin to unfold. A reciprocal becoming-strange.

Any text is an *invitation au voyage* or *chāvushi*, a call to be displaced from oneself. It is an invitation for the reader to set out towards the orient of the text. If Akhavān's poems can be wrested from their cultural bedrock and read outside of Iran, in a language other than Persian, then only if the reader is prepared to follow: follow along into a territory that seems bare of all signposts and alien, perhaps forbidding at first. After a while, the strangeness will begin to subside and give way to a sense of wonder. As Akhavān says in SABZ, his account of a psychedelic nocturnal ascension, "tā diyāri ke gharibi-hāsh miāmad be cheshmam āshnā, raftam" ("I reached a zone whose strangenesses seemed familiar to my eyes"). Implied in the *invitation au voyage*, however, there is also a second call, a plea not to assimilate the foreign to the familiar in an act of epistemic violence. What is new and unknown can only be grasped in its specific nature if distances are preserved: distances to a shared horizon.

The matter of translation belongs to the argument of self and other, of epistemic violence and becoming strange to oneself. While the problem as such is not addressed in my thesis, some general remarks may nonetheless be in place. What kind of paradigm

can be thought for translation? Antoine Berman writes that *le travail sur la lettre* is neither calque nor reproduction but an attentiveness to the play of signifiers.[3] He proposes a figure of thought that is mindful of alterity and the danger of distances being disavowed and collapsed: *l'auberge du lointain.* Conceived not as a stronghold but a porous structure, language gives shelter to a distant idiom and, in the process, is touched by something that remains irreducibly foreign. Only few translations have entered the history of literature as autonomous works of art: Luther's bible translation, Hölderlin's Greek hymns, George's renderings of Baudelaire, Dante and Shakespeare, Celan's poetic recreations of numerous modern writers, along a meridian. All these instances of a poetically redoubled word go against the grain and make strange. They do not embed the foreign idiom in an illusory smoothness but trace a physical mark on the host language. After Hölderlin's translations of Pindar and Sophokles, German too had changed. As Benjamin says in his enigmatically luminous essay on the task of the translator, "Luther, Voß, Hölderlin, George haben die Grenzen des Deutschen erweitert."[4] Here, the process of translation no longer comports the appropriation to a familiar self. Instead, a dialogue is enacted between two languages that leaves both subtly different, subtly other.

The materiality of a language cannot be translated, carried over. Made up of sounds and resonances that forge associations, create rhythms and scansions of meaning, language is abstract and worldly, structure and hypostasis at once: the immaterial substance out of which poetry is wrought. Yet, under what conditions can the sound-signs of language be understood by a human subject? All natural languages belong to a lifeworld or horizon of experience against which phenomena appear

[3] Berman 1999, 14.

[4] Benjamin 6:19.

meaningful. Ineluctably, the act of translation uproots a work from its cultural and memorial matrix, which is the bedrock of a shared history, a shared past. If a work is to survive at all outside its first lifeworld, the translation must become part of a new horizon and recreate the poetic immediacy and temporal depth of the original text elsewhere, by different means.

Reading Akhavān's poetry what do we hear, see, perceive? In Persian, we hear the grain of a voice and see splinters of time, frozen in the moment of speaking. We glimpse the traces of what is gone in the poem's words: stifled anger at an iniquitous execution, despair in the wake of a *coup d'état*, a spectral procession of prisoners, the frostbites of political repression, also the joy of watching pigeons soar into the morning sky or the ecstasy of hashish remembered. Then, like figures arranged on a painting, along the vanishing lines of history, words suddenly become little skylights that give, as it were, onto time itself: across decades and centuries, they recall a past moment of literary time. Historical resonances, intertextual associations, anagrams, irony or synaesthesia are so many effects of memory. Their very condition of possibility is that vast storehouse of collective and personal references without which no sense could be made of art. It almost seems as if memory itself were another material presence, embedded in language. When he confessed his indifference to Western poetry, Akhavān unwittingly touched on an issue that becomes more acute as the distance between languages and their lifeworlds increases. The translations of Western poetry into Persian had not been able to carry over the imponderable materiality that accounts for much of poetic meaning. Akhavān, perhaps more than any other Iranian poet of the past century, was keenly aware of this fact. In his poems, language is no mere vehicle of signification but memory, embodied in words, sounds and rhythms.

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While it would be idle to search for influences outside the literary tradition in which Akhavān is embedded, a number of analogies or correspondences can be traced. My readings of Akhavān's poetry are guided by three essential paradigms, borrowed from Paul Celan, Maurice Blanchot and Peter Szondi: *meridian*, *entretien infini* and *strette* are figures of signification unfolding in time and space, without final closure.

Reading – approaching – Akhavān's poems we may first think with Celan of a *meridian*, immaterial but worldly, terrestrial, circular, "etwas […] über die beiden Pole in sich selbst Zurückkehrendes":[5] a line that passes through disparate places and lifeworlds to trace the fleeting reality of an encounter. Then, there is the figure of the *entretien infini* that reaches across different literary traditions without preordained purpose or scheme. As in Blanchot's unending conversation with Georges Bataille, thought is allowed to develop in a many-voiced space that spans cultures and languages. In such a space, the poem becomes thinkable as *Flaschenpost*, addressed to an unknown and unknowable "you" outside all determinations of origin. The space of the *entretien infini* is a fragmentary space of echoes and mute resonances. Some voices are still subliminal as their notation has not yet been sounded. Nevertheless, these voices exist and are integral to the polyphonic structure of the conversation. Hans Magnus Enzensberger in his *Museum der modernen Poesie* of 1960 sought to create the ground for an infinite conversation, a global language of poetry. The project itself was, to be sure, a child of its time and Enzensberger himself later revoked some of his starry-eyed internationalism. Indeed, there can be no such thing as a single language of poetry, the thought itself is totalitarian. However, there may a space in which different languages

[5] Celan 3:202.

and poetic voices are allowed to weave into and across each other. A heteroglot space, both one and many.

In some places, poems of Akhavān and Celan will be *enggeführt* with each other, like remote echoes that resonate not according to the laws of causality but rather enact the immaterial bond of a shared humanity. Elsewhere, the voices of Ricœur, de Certeau or Levinas will be made to interweave with certain themes in Akhavān's poetry: narrative and historical time, the wandering subject and the irreducible alterity of the "you." Yet, what is *Engführung* or *strette*, what does it mean? The word is prismatic, overdetermined perhaps, in its threefold sense, denoting a poem by Celan; a text by Szondi, originally written in French, on Celan's poem; and, finally, a technical aspect of counterpoint. *Enggeführt*, the individual voices never merge in a unison beyond difference but rather dovetail temporarily in a play of echoes as subject and countersubject bounce off each other. Each voice retains its autonomous significance and plays a necessary part in the coherence of the polyphonic structure. Ambiguity and polyvalence are preserved as the voices touch. For Celan, *strette* is a way of writing, of carrying existence to language. For Szondi it is a way of approaching the poem as a figure of this same existence. In both cases, there is an act of seeing or reading that is always renewed, never final. An act, also, in which a particular historical moment – a moment of danger, as Benjamin would say – is captured as it flashes past.

While outright comparisons with Western poetic movements are problematic and the search for real or imagined influences only serves to deflect attention from the *specific* modernity, the *specific* outrageousness of Nimā and Akhavān, *parallels* can be drawn to

certain concerns in 20th century Western poetry. Travelling ideas are an elusive object of study and a genealogy of influence would need to consider the inevitable time lag between the emergence of Western literary movements and their arrival in Iran. The selective and somewhat arbitrary reception of authors and artistic phenomena further complicates matters. Thus, for example, expressionism or more radically fragmenting movements like Futurism or Dada never left more than a superficial impression. Equally, Alphonse de Lamartine is held up as a paragon of modern poetry while Baudelaire is romanticised, tamed, and bereft of his unsettling, cynical force. Louis Aragon is preferred to René Char. (Rewritten from the outside, Western literary history turns into something quite different as all received canons appear conjured away.) Things only begin to shift in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, when social changes and a general atmosphere of discontent also led writers to seek out more adventurous literary models. However, the poets that could have entered into dialogue with Akhavān – Trakl, Celan, Mandelstam, Dylan Thomas maybe – are still on the margins, semi-obscure, muffled in translations that are barely adequate.

What, then, are the shared experiences of modernity: experiences that echo across cultures and languages to be drawn into the utopian space of world poetry? And, whose poetic voices interlace for a brief moment with Akhavān's before parting again, to follow their own distinct courses?

There is, above all, the experience of a distorted, disfigured century: of revolution and war, of lost innocence and powerlessness in the face of events that can no longer be grasped by reason. We hear Celan speak, hear Ingeborg Bachmann, Nelly Sachs, also hear Theodor Adorno and his famous dictum. Of course, Iran was only marginally touched by the catastrophes of World War II, but the country had seen a failed Constitutional Revolution, had suffered under the military dictatorship of Rezā Shāh

Pahlavi and, in 1953, had lived through a fateful *coup d'état* that shattered all hopes for an autonomous and free state. The modern experience of a fractionised world (Erich Kahler) is most tangible in Akhavān's narrative poems, his broken epics. ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN or ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR are poems of lost innocence and the inability to oppose forces which in their technologised horror defy rationality. While it would be foolish to call these poems anything but modern, a guiding motif of modern alienation appears to be absent from them. Modern literature typically places the human subject within an urban environment, as a pawn of the metropolitan moloch or a *flâneur* through the cityscape. In Akhavān, however, the city is a mere negativity: a spectral presence that is never described, never evoked in its details. Adumbrated as a symbolic space of estrangement, the abstract lanes and alleyways with their ghostly cones of light retrace the impossibility of an elsewhere that could counteract the breakdown of human solidarity.

There is the experience of language: a language that has itself become strange and fragmented, the illusion of its coherence shattered. Literature in the 20th century no longer trusts the power of language to represent and assert. As in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos Letter* of 1902, words dissolve to the perceiving subject, become torqued, fractured and strained to the end of all sense. Experience seems to have been severed from the possibility of linguistic expression. Little in Persian poetry before the 1970s revokes sense or the belief in language altogether. Only in the ecstatic sayings of the Persian mystics do the edges of language become frayed. Many centuries later, Akhavān in some of his poems approaches a point where language begins to peter out into babble as suffering and pain can no longer be clothed in coherent sounds. Here as elsewhere in Akhavān, the emptiness of hope – an austere, at times even absurd

despair – and the experience of language being hollowed out between silence and the necessity to keep speaking recalls Beckett.

There is the question of the "I" that speaks in modern literature. Numerous Western poets in the past century resorted to a play of masks or called for the absence of any kind of personal subjectivity. The affective detachment of Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, the *personae* of Ezra Pound, the self-effacement of T.S. Eliot in his writing or the nihilist dissections of Gottfried Benn come to mind. The hermetic austerity of nature in Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale and Salvatore Quasimodo amounts to another mask, another eclipse. Man here no longer stands at the centre but appears as a peripheral figure, absorbed into the act of perception itself. Hugo Friedrich in his classic study *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (1956) argues that a process of dehumanisation subtends all poetry after Baudelaire. Certainly, Friedrich's narrative is sweeping and fails to account for those poets who did not disavow or exile the human. However, it would be idle to deny the modern experience of fragmentation in a world that offers no shelter or sense of belonging. Akhavān never renounced the idea of the subject yet his "I" lacks the gravitational force of the classical self. Instead, a *cogito brisée* (Ricœur) sounds in Akhavān, above all in his lyric poems: a fragile, permeable cogito that is the anchorage of relation.

There is the quest for a new language of love: a language that breaks the poetic and social codes of previous ages. *Malina* (1971) by Ingeborg Bachmann most poignantly recalls the dilemma of Akhavān's love poetry. As the impossibility of relation becomes clear at the end of Bachmann's novel, the "I" vanishes – a desperate feat of legerdemain – into a crack in the wall. Yet, death in all its ridiculous absurdity is real, not symbolic. In Akhavān, it is the impossible lover who, having no right to exist, haunts the poem as a spectral, unattainable presence. The beginnings of a new *discours*

amoureux are brutally stifled. Elsewhere, however, a different, possible kind of relation appears, beyond the eros of human desire. In the history of modern literature, no other poets have thought as keenly about the in-between, the bridge traced between two subjectivities, as Celan and Akhavān. Poetry here becomes the figure and locus of an encounter that exists for as long as the address is sustained. Absolved of the question of faith, poetic speech enacts an apophasis without God, in search of a utopian Other.

Finally, there is the question of time and history or, rather, of the *possibility* of history: a question that becomes more acute in the modern age, indissociable from a fear of oblivion. Celan and Akhavān in their poetry speak of the split that runs through modern consciousness. For both writers, the human being is *unbehaust*, alien within and to itself, struggling to make sense of a reality that defies reason. At the same time, there is a profound awareness of the historicity of words and their temporal depth. Language is thought as the *dark-selvedge* (Celan/Felstiner) that frames and looks out onto what must not be forgotten. In the 20th century, the search for a possible history takes on the shape of messianism, as the hope for another time, another history: Benjamin is one of the foremost thinkers of the ruptured, catastrophic, unredeemed *now*. Parallels here are no coincidence: like certain strands of Judaism, Shiite Islam circles around the expectation of a messiah. Stripped of all transcendence, the thought of a saviour in Akhavān is condensed into the bleak experience of fractured time. Almost within reach, there is always an elsewhere through which the redemptor keeps passing. Yet, as if a nightmare had imposed its irrational laws on reality, the border to the *other* space cannot be negotiated. While expectation is thus emptied of sense it remains vital as a structure of being, an absurdity that resembles the insurmountable deadlock in Kafka's *Before the Law* or *The Castle*. In their different ways, all of Akhavān's poems, both lyric and narrative, are figurations of a strangely perverted messianic conception of time.

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The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters provide the theoretical and literary-historical basis of our argument while the final two chapters seek to show how Nimā's innovations are applied, elaborated and expanded by Akhavān. In close readings of a wide range of poems I seek to understand Akhavān's texts as crystallisations of a historical moment. At the same time, however, I argue that his poems can no longer be explained within the linear evolution of Persian literary history: in their language and imagery, they point to an elsewhere that has not yet been mapped.

Nimā Yushij is generally regarded as the founder of modern Persian poetry and Akhavān consciously places himself in Nimā's lineage. Drawing mainly on Nimā's and Akhavān's theoretical texts, my introductory chapters examine the innovations in rhythm and metaphor proposed by Nimā between the 1920s and 1940s. Nimā was the first poet in Persian literary history to leave behind a corpus of poetological texts, ranging from fictional letters to a young poet to essays on the nature of seeing, the problem of representation and the task of the writer. The moment in which the poet enters the stage as a theoretician marks a threshold that recalls the watershed of European Romanticism around 1800: as literature folds back on itself and becomes aware of its own status as art the passage to modernity is accomplished. Akhavān's essays carry on the torch but are significantly more varied in scope and tone than Nimā's texts. Erudite scholar as well as consummate stylist, Akhavān wrote with equal facility and depth on various issues of classical and modern poetics, Persian music, fellow writers and ethics in the widest sense of the word. His two volumes on the

theoretical and historical foundations of Nimā's reforms were the first sustained critical examination of the seismic event that had changed the course of Persian poetry for good. A separate study would be necessary to account for the complexity of these texts and shed light on their significance within the evolution of literary criticism in Iran. Over the following pages, however, I shall be concerned with Nimā's and Akhavān's theoretical writings only in so far as they elucidate certain poetic phenomena that would otherwise remain puzzling.

Chapter 3 examines aspects of time. Time is the element that permeates and structures all of Akhavān's poetic thought as the lived, human time of perception and the time of the poem, configured in the text. It is in time that the relation to an interpellated "you" is enacted. Spaces of memory are accessible or transfigured as utopian time-spaces that, for all their transience and immateriality, offer unlikely opposition to an oppressive political order. The poem itself is an echo space in which a profoundly heteroglot language becomes the token of "une irréductible pluralité, comme si chaque parole était le retentissement indéfini d'elle-même au sein d'un espace multiple."[6] Experience is thought as movement through itinerant spaces that come into being and are opened up with the steps of the wayfarer. At the intersection of times – the time of the dream and of expectation, of memory, desire, errancy, night and death – stands the paradoxical figure of a garden bereaved of all possessions yet shining forth with inalienable dignity: *bāgh-e bi-bargi* is both memorial to the absence of hope and impossible act of resistance to the extinction of being.

Chapter 4 treats the genres of lyric and epic and their specific expression in Akhavān. To begin with, I attempt to define lyric and narrative poetry not along the axes of subjectivity and objectivity, diegesis and mimesis, but as different configurations of

[6] Blanchot 1969, 113.

time. Specifically, I argue that the time-space of a lyric poem differs essentially from the configurations of time that unfold in narrative texts. Akhavān's lyricism has been overshadowed by his fractured epics and a subtle adjustment of perspective is needed. The lyric can no longer be contained within the narrow confines of love poetry but expands to become the interpellation of an unknowable Other. Akhavān's *ghazal* is a poem of absence, reaching out to an alterity that remains forever elusive: a departed lover, a silent, impassive God, the green smoke of hashish or a spring that eternally fails to redeem winter. Desire passes into the text and there becomes the memory of an experience that may never even have taken place. Yet, inscribed on the words of the poem, an irrefutable *c'était là* (de Certeau) leaves the stigmata of a certitude. The chapter then comes to a close with a reading of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, one of Akhavān's most emblematic poems. In the course of my analysis, the questions that have occupied us throughout will be made to converge: language, perception, self and time. As ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH both exploits and transgresses the conventions of epic, the failure of words to account for a reality beyond rational grasp is revealed. In the interstices of language, meanwhile, the possibility of a different history is shadowed forth. A subliminal hope.

At the end of the thesis, an appendix offers a critical look at the primary sources and a review of the secondary literature on Akhavān in Persian, including a summary of the main interpretative approaches. The appendix is intended as a guide for anyone wishing to deepen their knowledge of Akhavān's work.

My dissertation seeks to show how Akhavān's poetry is embedded in the history of Persian literature but transcends the tradition, infinitely, to enter the space of world

literature. The text was not written with a specialist audience in mind. Rather, my intention was to address issues that are of interest to comparatists, scholars of Persian literature and the general educated reader of poetry. Academically, I hope to have brought new perspectives and impulses to the study of modern Persian poetry in the West. Furthermore, I hope that certain strands of thought, insights and hypotheses will be taken up in a future dialogue with Iranian scholars. Beyond these pious aspirations, however, there can be no doubt that my text is itself a message in a bottle, addressed to an uncertain, unknown reader. Writing about a Persian poet in a foreign academic environment and with alien philosophical trappings is unquestionably quixotic. Besides, the foreign language can never be more than an approximation to the *Gegenwärtigkeit* (Szondi) of a poetic word resonating in the air from which it was born. Nevertheless, perhaps my message in a bottle – my *qāsedak* – will reach a reader to lead him or her back to Akhavān. That is the ultimate hope.

Guidelines for the reader

Throughout the dissertation, poems and longer prose passages will be cited in Persian, followed by English translations that – while evidently falling short of the original – aspire to being readable. The English renderings do not, however, claim to be on a par with the originals. Serious translations of Nimā's and Akhavān's poetry and their critical works would constitute a project in itself, to be addressed in the future. For the moment, I would merely like to point out two specific difficulties facing any translator of Nimā and Akhavān: 1) Persian has a highly flexible syntax, which means that states of suspension – of floating affiliation – can be created that are impossible or very difficult to render into English. (The incompatibility of different syntactic orders hobbles all

attempts at translating Nimā.) 2) Intertextual allusions cannot be rendered in another language, especially if no shared cultural space exists. For this reason, some of the pleasure an educated Persian reader would derive from Akhavān's profoundly heteroglot style is necessarily curtailed in English.

Shorter passages embedded in the English text of the dissertation as well as all Persian names and titles of poems are given in transliteration. Here, I roughly follow the transliteration system proposed by the Encyclopaedia Iranica, with certain exceptions: the silent final h in the (mostly feminine) Arabic ending is given as -eh rather than -a, in accordance with the standard modern Iranian pronunciation; č, ž and š are given as ch, zh and sh; the diacritical marks used to differentiate among the variants of h, z and s in Persian script but not in pronunciation have been omitted.

Dates are mostly given according to the Persian solar calendar (Solar Hejri) or, rarely, the Islamic lunar calendar (h.q.). Where necessary, in particular to highlight correspondences between different calendars and literary histories, Gregorian years are indicated alongside the Solar Hejri dates.

Akhavān's poetry collections and theoretical texts are referred to in their respective latest editions, as detailed in the bibliography.

CHAPTER 1
AN EMANCIPATION OF RHYTHM

In this chapter, we shall address interrelated questions regarding the nature of rhythm, the production of poetic meaning and the structural role of the voice in Nimā's and Akhavān's poems. A critique of what Henri Meschonnic calls "l'opération essentiellement dualiste du mètre"[7] lies at the origin of our discussion. While metrical systems are based on the periodic return of a pattern and thus remain external to natural speech, rhythm is immanent to language conceived as *discours*.[8] In other words, neither preceding speech nor imposed on it retroactively, rhythm extends in non-cyclical time: it is structurally indissociable from the moment of enunciation. Nima's reforms of classical Persian metre constitute an attempt to make poetic language converge with the human time of speech. Both Nimā and Akhavān wrote extensively on theoretical issues to vindicate their poetic practice. However, the struggle for a new language is clearly inscribed on the poems themselves. Through textual analyses, we shall over the following pages examine how notions of subjectivity, time and space are interwoven in Nimā's and Akhavān's works.

Space in Nimā and Akhavān is a space of resonance: an echo-space which, neither inside nor outside alone, marks the border between the speaking "I" and what

[7] Meschonnic 1982, 622.

[8] While *parole* and *discours* are used almost interchangeably by Meschonnic, Benveniste prefers the latter term. Ricœur (1975, 89; see also ibid., 159) expounds the stakes clearly: "Le choix même du terme de discours par Benveniste est significatif ; la linguistique, dans la mesure où elle est d'abord linguistique de la langue, tend à faire de la parole un simple résidu de ses analyses. C'est pour marquer la consistance de son objet que Benveniste choisit le terme de *discours* de préférence à celui de *parole.*"

lies beyond, elsewhere, in the future. Time exists not as chronometric time but as the subjective and perceived – directional – time of rhythm. Embodied in the voice, rhythm becomes the structuring principle of the enunciation. The non-human or half-human voices, above all the bird figures that pervade Nimā's and Akhavān's poems are not so much allegories of the lonely poet and the futility of his call but rather emblems of an opening: in their song a new possibility of meaning beckons. Theirs is a language that cannot be fully assimilated for it belongs to a creature that does not share in our humanity and thus remains other: a language that can be broadcast and disseminated but never owned. A language, also, that is still to come, *infans*, analogous to an "inchoatif du sens."[9]

Isochronies of night

With day only ever approaching but never truly coming to pass, night is the fundamental tonality of Nimā's and Akhavān's poems: not as a theme that is treated, a romantic *topos* or setting against which an action takes place. Rather, night becomes the space in which voices can resound: it is the condition of possibility of speech and listening, of address and relation. At the same time as an echo-space opens up, on the verge of dusk, sight is no longer reliable. While light recedes and disappears, distances are blurred and the objects of vision become unreal, oneiric. Yet the night is not merely a space whose day is sombre, *ruzash tārik* (BARF, 1334), constituted by the absence of

[9] Meschonnic (2006, 112) writes: "Quant à cette notion, que la poésie moderne est difficile, on peut observer les reculs successifs de l'effet d'obscur. Non que l'obscurité s'évente avec le temps. Mais peut-être était-elle le produit provisoire d'un inchoatif du sens, liée à un jeu de langage nouveau, à une forme de vie." On the birth to language of the human subject see Christopher Fynsk, *Infant Figures: The Death of the "Infans" and Other Scenes of Origin.*

light. It is *essentially* different. In BEKHʷĀN EY HAMSAFAR BĀ MAN (1324), the night is called *tārik-peymā* and as such, keeps folding back on itself, caught in an endless loop of essences redoubled by attributes:

که هشیار ست، کی بیدار، کی بیمار ؟
کسی در این شب تاریک پیما این نمی داند.

who is alert, who awake and who sick?
in this dark-journeying night no-one knows.[10]

In analogy to a night that is no longer the foil of day but a separate, independent entity, shadows become strangely overdetermined, steeped in the colour of blackness, as in one of Nimā's last and most iconic poems, TO RĀ MAN CHASHM DAR RĀHAM (1336):

ترا من چشم در راهم شباهنگام
که می گیرند در شاخ « تلاجن » سایه ها رنگ سیاهی

anxiously I watch out for you at night
when in the branches of *talājan* shadows take on a black hue[11]

In KINEH-YE SHAB (1323) the night sucks the red colour out of the day. On the night's edge, the horizon, as if by an unspoken act of violence, has been robbed of daylight and is *dis*lumined:

نیست دیگر سر موئی به ره این افق گمشده نور
شب، دریده به دو چشم آن مطرود،
در سیاهی نگاهش همه غرق

there is no longer a flicker of light on the way to this lost horizon
the night, that expelled one, with her eyes torn open

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[10] Darkness here is an absolutised state of being as Nimā replaces the noun (*tāriki*) with its adjective (*tārik*). Akhavān later takes up this *bedʿat*, as we shall see in the final two chapters.

[11] According to Qezvānchāhi (233–234) *talājan* is a shrub with yellow flowers growing on the mountain slopes around Nimā's birthplace Yush. (Qezvānchāhi's glossary of regional, non-Persian expressions in Nimā's writings the book, published with the help of the "Cultural Association of Mazandaran," is an extremely helpful source for the non-Persian, "minor language" scatterings in Nimā's work.) It is interesting to note that Nimā himself – while consciously placing the non-Persian term between inverted commas and thus marking it as foreign – provides no explanation or footnote to his poem.

in the gloom of her gaze all are drowned[12]

The night becomes a body without bounds, extensionless yet pervading all space: a black hole of antimatter whose eyes are two vortices gorging life. No personification is at work here, rather, *corporified*, an abstract phenomenon takes on a disconcerting, tangible presence. Devoid of any creatureliness let alone humanity yet still acting as *subject*, the night is reduced to the state of a predicate without noun, cast out and exiled: *ān matrud*. On a different phenomenal plane, the absorption of things into their qualities is continued. Throughout the poem, sounds recur that designate – and are themselves, in turn – sounds: the night sucks or suckles (*mimakad*). At the end, nothing remains but the lingering noise of the night, sucking, suckling, without object or sense, intransitively:

هیس ! آهسته شب تیره هنوز
می مکد.

hush! quietly the dark night still
suckles.[13]

There is no escape, as we ourselves are the resonance chamber through which these sounds echo.[14]

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[12] An alternative reading might be: "night had torn apart the eyes of the expelled." Such a reading may be supported by the fact that the preposition *be* in Nimā often serves no real function. Furthermore, in the line "nist digar sar-e mu'i be rah-e in ofoq-e gomshodeh nur" there is a fleeting sense, only retrospectively belied by the habitual logic of syntax, that the horizon itself might be "light-lost": *gomshodeh-nur*. Akhavān in QOWLI DAR ABU-'ATĀ (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), a poem whose imagery – the bleak immensity of a sea without horizon – is distantly reminiscent of KINEH-YE SHAB, uses a similar construction: "che bim ey gahvāreh-ye jonbān-e daryā – gom kardeh sahel?" Compare also the line in QASIDEH (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*): "dar shab-e shum-e sahar-gom-kardeh-ye bi kowkab-e qotbi."

[13] Ten years after KINEH-YE SHAB, Akhavān lets the barren cloud, false herald of rain, say in SATARVAN (1333, *Zemestān*): "bepushad har derakhti miveh'ash rā dar panāh-e man / ze khʷorshidi ke dāyem mimakad khun-o tarāvat rā." Here, too, *makidan* carries sinister associations of a vital force being drained.

[14] In KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ (1325) it is a mosquito that is sucking blood: "pasheh'ash mimakad az khun-e tan lokht-o siāh" – infinite smallness and infinite extension, equally relations of the most intimate proximity.

Nimā's poem SHAB HAMEH SHAB (written in 1337, little more than a year before his death) is an emblem of the double temporality of language as speech – and listening, poised towards a yet unknown sense:[15]

شب همه شب شکسته خواب به چشمم
گوش بر زنگ کاروانستم

night all night sleep fractured in my eyes
I listen out for the caravan's bell

The poet is tensed in expectation of the redeeming jingle of a bell (itself an index – in the Peircean sense – of human presence) yet his ear seems to have been dissociated from the body. Listening does not occur from the place of suffering (the prison-space of the night) but from the *locus* of the voice's origin. No-one speaks within the textual bounds of the poem – the only act of enunciation is the poem itself. Surmounting the disparity of origins the poet's language is consubstantial – *hamzabān* – with the voices that reach his ear from afar. (What kind of language? There are no words, not even a human provenance that can be discerned. These voices do not belong.)

با صداهای نیم زنده ز دور
همعنان گشته، همزبان هستم.

stirrup to stirrup with sounds half-alive from afar
I share in their speech

As the perceiving consciousness comes abreast with the sounds it hears, the distance between the "I" and the half-animate voices collapses. Or rather, the promise of words being spoken – addressed – *elsewhere* creates an unextended yet limitless space that exists parallel to the nocturnal prison-space of the "I." Language is shared, though it may

[15] Nimā's own footnote to the poem reads, "in she'r rā makhsusan be do vazn sākhteh'am" ("I have intentionally composed this poem in two metres"). Composing a poem in different metres was also a way for classical poets to show off their technical skill.

not bear any meaning. Then, a paradoxical (illusionary?) emptiness comes tumbling down, adverbially redoubled, as débris, ruins:

جاده اما ز همه کس خالی ست
ریخته بر سر آوار آوار
این منم مانده به زندانِ شبِ تیره که باز
شب همه شب
گوش بر زنگ کاروانستم.

the road, though, is empty of all
tumbling down on my head load after load
here I am caught in the dark night's jail as again
night all night
I listen out for the caravan's bell.

The unbridgeable, material void of the dark night separates the "I" – immobilised in a state of listening – from anything that might come to pass and break the deadlock of expectancy.

There is no ocularity. Instead, perception is the perception of sounds and voices moving through space. No longer organ of sight, the eye is the black mirror in which things are reflected. It cannot see anything but only attest to the absence of light: an obscure luminosity tracing the image of ruin (RI RĀ). As the habitual meaning of perception is reversed, the eye – its dark surface – makes visible what cannot be seen. Uncannily, cruelly perhaps, the unseeing, blinded eye of an Other becomes the instrument that allows *us* to perceive.

With sight failing, distances are perceived as or, rather, become a space measured by voices and sounds. In PEY-E DĀRU CHUPĀN (1324) Nimā, under the pretext of offering an explanation for a figure of speech commonly used in his native Mazandaran, writes a dreamlike, surreal story with highly charged imagery. The poem itself is preceded by a short prose piece whose alleged purpose is that of offering a gloss to the subsequent verse narrative. Once again, the night here is a time-space that thwarts vision and makes it impossible to retrace the topography in which the action

unfolds: convinced to be aiming at a deer, the young shepherd shoots into the dark. The incidents of the poem – if not altogether figments of a feverish dream – appear twisted, torqued, as if obeying the unknown rules of a different reality. In the absence of light, there is nothing that could either prove or disprove what we – through the shepherd, the two perspectives are equally unstable – make out to have happened.

و همه گرداگرد،
خفته در خامشی هوشربای مرموز
زن صدایش به نقطه ای ابهام انگیز
دور می زد به ره جنگل گویی از دور

and all around
asleep in the heady mysterious silence
the woman, her voice circling over the forest path
somewhere, untold, as if from afar

The perceiving consciousness is embedded in a deep nocturnal space. Who is asleep? Who is listening? We do not know. We only know that no sound or voice bereaves the mind of its reason but silence itself. What remains is the paradox of the woman's voice, a point without extension, at the innermost core or heart (*be del*), closest to the self, an eddy of pain resounding "as if from afar": where is the origin of that voice, where can its origin be imagined?

The prose gloss reads:

این بود که الیکه توانست شوکای تیر خورده ی خود را پیدا کند. امّا زنی را دید و صدای زاری او را شنید که مانند مار زخم دیده می پیچید.

In this way, Alikā was able to find the buck he had shot with his arrow. But he saw a woman and heard her cries of pain which circled like a wounded snake.

As the young shepherd reaches his prey, visual perception is overlaid by a sound. The voice has itself turned into an image – a metaphor – that displaces, usurps reality. Is it the night that brings forth this split?

In Akhavān's CHĀVUSHI (1335, *Zemestān*) the epic voyage is no longer that of a hero traversing space to return to an origin, changed. (The heroes of the Book of Kings have long died.)

بیا ره توشه بر داریم.
قدم در راه بگذاریم.
بسوی سر زمینهائی که دیدارش،
بسان شعله آتش،
دواند در رگم خون نشیط زنده بیدار.
نه این خونی که دارم ؛ پیر و سرد و تیره و بیمار.
چو کرم نیمه جانی بی سرو بی دم
که از دهلیز نقب آسایِ زهراندود رگهایم
کشاند خویشتن را، همچو مستان دست بر دیوار،
بسوی قلب من، این غرفه با پرده هایِ تار.
و میپرسد، صدایش ناله ای بی نور :
ـ « کسی اینجاست ؟
[...]
و میبیند صدائی نیست، نور آشنائی یست، حتی از نگاه مرده ای هم ردّ پائی نیست.

come, let us take our bundle.
let us hit the road.
towards lands whose sight
will, like a fire's flame,
make joyous, quick, alert blood circulate in my veins.
not this blood that I have; stale, cold, dark and sick.
like a moribund worm without head or tail
dragging itself through the cavernous toxic corridors of my veins
like drunkards groping along a wall,
towards my heart, this cubicle with sombre curtains,
and asks, its voice a lightless lament:
– « is someone there ?
[…] »
and sees there is no sound, no familiar light, not even the trace of a dead gaze.

CHĀVUSHI stands in complete stillness: the journey ends at the call, the invitation to set out. Or rather, all movement is turned inwards to unfold in a space that obeys the same impossible perspective as SHAB HAMEH SHAB or PEY-E DĀRU CHUPĀN. In Akhavān's poem, the veins and ventricle of the heart become an echo chamber where the "I" – divorced from itself – speaks and voices questions that glimmer in the dark for a brief moment before dying away into silence. Without a "you" there to answer, the voice is thrown

back to an unredeemed existence: "a lightless lament."[16] Jean-Luc Nancy in *À l'écoute* speaks of resonance as "le timbre de l'écho du sujet." He writes: "La résonance est à la fois celle d'un corps sonore pour lui-même et celle de la sonorité dans un corps écoutant qui, lui-même, sonne en écoutant."[17] In Nima's and Akhavān's poems we see precisely this dialectic at work. Both phenomenon and perception, the echo unfolds between a body as resonance chamber and the act of listening as protension, oriented towards a future that lies *elsewhere*, beyond the prison-space of self: listening out for the caravan's bell, for a sound to be carried along with the road, for a scream of pain to be localised and dissolved or for the answer to an anxious interpellation. Paradoxically, the origins of self and other become blurred or, rather, the "I" becomes dislocated and seems to rise from a place that does not coincide with perception. At the same time, however, a necessary distance is retained. Echo and mirror image need to be thought as secondary existences. They must remain separate from their origins and can only ever merge temporarily in an illusion of oneness. Perhaps this is the elemental pain at the core of SHAB HAMEH SHAB, PEY-E DĀRU CHUPĀN or CHĀVUSHI: an abyss keeps being traced between

[16] Shafi'i Kadkani (1378, 273–274) mentions the image of *āvāz-e rowshan* in a treatise from the 4th century (A.H.). Ricœur (1975, 297) writes: "Le métaphore développe son pouvoir de réorganiser la vision des choses lorsque c'est un « règne » entier qui est transposé […]; parler de la sonorité d'une peinture, ce n'est plus faire émigrer un prédicat isolé, mais assurer l'incursion d'une règne entier sur un territoire étranger."

[17] Nancy 2002, 76–77. Merleau-Ponty (1979, 177) makes similar connections between body, perception, subjectivity and space – articulated as outside and inside – when he writes: "Le corps interposé n'est pas lui-même chose, matière interstitielle, tissu conjonctif, mais *sensible pour soi*, ce qui veut dire, non pas cette absurdité : couleur que se voit, surface qui se touche – mais ce paradoxe [?] : un ensemble de couleurs et de surfaces habitées par un toucher, une vision, donc *sensible exemplaire*, qui offre à celui qui l'habite et le sent de quoi sentir tout ce qui au-dehors lui ressemble, de sorte que, pris dans le tissu des choses, il le tire tout à lui, l'incorpore, et, du même mouvement, communique aux choses sur lesquelles il se ferme *cette identité sans superposition, cette différence sans contradiction, cet écart du dedans et du dehors, qui constituent son secret natal* [italics added]."

the "I" at the origin of perception and the Other which – blinded eye or mute echo – forever fails to respond.

The immanence of perception

The night in Nimā and Akhavān is a space that remains irredeemably void but at the same time founds the possibility of speech and listening, of dialogue and relation. Deeply ambivalent, the night offers no traction or shelter to the human being that passes through it: existence is precarious in a night-space that recalls – initially? – the dehumanised, barren, alienating spaces of much modernist poetry.[18]

One of Nimā's most accomplished and at the same time most enigmatic poems, DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH (1325), sets in with the description of a scene that is determined not by any reference to a stable object but by action itself:

شامگاهان که رؤیت دریا
نقش در نقش می نهفت کبود
داستانی نه تازه کرد به کار
رشته ای بست و رشته ای بگشود
رشته های دگر بر آب ببرد.

at dusk as the sea's vision
placed pattern upon bluish pattern
it engaged an unnew story
knotted a thread and unknotted a thread
swept others away on the water.

Who is acting here? Can a subject be discerned that is capable of action? Even a repeated perusal of the poem's first sentence does not allow us to pin down a human agent. Instead, syntax itself creates a sense of suspension. Thus, in a first reading of the stanza we may have doubted the syntactic order of the sentence and searched for a subject other than *ro'iyat-e daryā*. However, it soon becomes clear that the sea's vision

[18] Friedrich, 168–177.

is indeed the non-human agent in these lines.[19] The poem uses a pliable and simple metrical form and there is no reason to assume that the indeterminate quality of syntax is caused by constraints of metre or rhyme. Rather, Nimā seems to have purposefully kept syntactic affiliations afloat to create ambiguities of sound and signification that recall the texts of Stéphane Mallarmé. Even today, DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH appears strikingly modern. No meaning can be abstracted from the movement of signs and perceptions in Nimā's poem. Instead, a phrase like "the sea's vision" defies resolution into "the vision the perceiving consciousness has of the sea." Even reworded, the expression retains an irreducible vestige of strangeness and further clouds the agent behind the processes that unfold in the poem.[20] These processes are themselves on the verge of inaction or stillness: ephemeral, cancelled out in a turn of breath, they come within reach of vision only in the instant of their reversal, as pattern is layered upon pattern and a range of waves is unravelled as a new range is woven. The phenomena described are immaterial

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[19] In this sense as well as thematically, Nimā's poem bears resemblance to Rimbaud's MARINE of 1872, which in France was the first poem written entirely in free verse (Friedrich, 85). While "free verse" itself is not without historical precedent, it is the *tradition* of modern poetry that begins with the *poème en prose* and *vers libre* and, consequently, notions of metre in poetry being questioned: "tout cela concourt à une définition non métrique du rythme" (Dessons and Meschonnic, 40). Shafi'i Kadkani (1370, 237–292) devotes a lengthy section of *Musiqi-ye She'r* to a discussion of *she'r-e mansur* ("prose poetry" or "poème en prose") in Persian – whose only successful exponent he considers to be Ahmad Shāmlu. Interestingly, all other major figures of 20th century (pre-1978) Persian poetry had chosen to write in *vazn-e Nimā'i*: the reasons underlying the relative failure of *she'r-e sepid* ("blank verse") in Iran would call for a separate study.

[20] Towards the beginning of his chapter on "L'entrelacs – le chiasme" in *Le visible et l'invisible* Merleau-Ponty (1979, 171) writes: "Le visible autour de nous semble reposer en lui-même. C'est comme si notre vision se formait en son cœur, ou comme s'il y avait de lui à nous une accointance aussi étroite que celle de la mer et de la plage. Et pourtant, il n'est pas possible que nous nous fondions en lui, ni qu'il passe en nous, car alors la vision s'évanouirait au moment de se faire, par disparition ou du voyant ou du visible." Merleau-Ponty in his later work seeks to overcome the ontological division between being and appearance, between the agent of perception and the thing seen. This is also, I would argue, the fundamental tenet of Nimā's poetics, as crystallised in DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH.

and keep being redoubled in their transience, like phantasmagorical images superseding each other in a magic lantern. In this movement, the poem follows the classical form of *mosammat* with its rondel of different themes. There is a perpetual alternation, from stanza to stanza, of things being offered and taken away. Nothing endures but a sense of impermanence that relegates all human presence to the margins of the phenomenal world. Even the potentially human subject in stanza three is flimsy and insubstantial:

همچنین در گشاد و شمع افروخت
آن نگارینِ چربدستْ استاد
گوشمالی به چنگ داد و نشست
پس چراغ نهاد بر دم باد
هرچه از ما به یک عتاب ببرد.

so he opened the door and lit a candle
that precious deft master
brushed the lyre's chords and sat down
then he placed the light on the edge of the wind
swept brusquely off what remained of us.

In '*Atā va Leqā-ye Nimā Yushij*, which – after *Bed'at-hā va Badāye'* – examines those aspects of Nimā's poetics that had previously been neglected by scholars, Akhavān writes:

اگر هم تعقید در شعر نیما هست، تعقیدی در نحوه تعبیر است و بعضی خصوصیات لفظیِ محلی مازندرانی که فضا و محیط زندگی اصلی و اصیل نیما بوده است [...] و تازه این گونه تعقیدات و ابهامات و خصوصیات لفظی و بیانی او مآلاً باز عقده ها و فروبستگیها و گره و گرایشهای شعری است نه عقده و گرهِ مطالب و مسأله های « علمی » و فنی و مصالح و عناصری که ربطی به شعر ندارد [...] .

Even if Nimā's poetry is complex and involuted, it is a hermeneutic complexity and has to do with certain lexical peculiarities of the region of Mazandaran, which was Nimā's native life space […] and even then, such involutions, ambiguities, lexical and rhetorical peculiarities are ultimately poetic difficulties, occlusions, ambiguities, knots and idiosyncracies, not "scholarly" and technical difficulties and problems or aspects that have no bearing on poetry.[21]

[21] Akhavān 1376b, 102–103; also see Akhavān 1376a, 142 and 159. *Bed'at-hā va Badāye'-e Nimā Yushij* and '*Atā va Leqā-ye Nimā Yushij* were originally published in 1357 and 1361 respectively.

The hermeticism of classical learned verse in this passage is opposed to the different kind of interpretative challenge posed by modern(ist) poetry in general and Nimā's poetry in particular.[22] Of course, Akhavān's analysis is reductive and blithely lumps a millennium of classical literature together in a single category. Scholarly caution is relinquished for the sake of pointed rhetorical contrast. Like all exaggerations, however, Akhavān's stepping into the breach for Nimā also contains a grain of truth. In Nimā's texts, syntactic and thus semantic relations are held in abeyance. Overdetermined, syntactic structures give rise to a kaleidoscope of potential meanings while the dissolution of an unambiguous, fixed tonal centre entails the loss of any conclusive point of return. This also means that allegory no longer provides the key to Nimā's images: "ān negārin-e charb-dast ostād" cannot be wholly equated with an allegorical figure of time or evanescence. Certainly, the master lyrist and the sea that paints – draws or traces – pattern upon pattern in a movement without beginning or end could be masks of the poet composing his texts. Yet, no personal subjectivity is tangible that would justify such an interpretation. Rather, it seems as if language itself were speaking. Images emerge without the agency of a perceiving "I" and without any apparent mimetic function: DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH does not reproduce an exterior reality but traces the unfolding of perception. Outside the frame of the poem all things disperse: there is no separate idea that has been clad in verse, no original or model to the artist's representation (*naqsh*). What is said exists only in and for the moment of enunciation, emblematised by the threefold meaning of *dam* as breath, moment and edge. The work

[22] George Steiner's brilliant essay "On Difficulty" (in the book of the same name) and Malcolm Bowie's captivating study of *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* deal with the nature of *difficulty* in classical as opposed to modern poetry. Meschonnic's chapter "Facile, difficile, et la théorie du langage" in *La Rime et la vie* (Meschonnic 2006, 96–118) is also pertinent. (Naturally, the line separating modern(ist) from classical difficulty cannot always be drawn apodictically.)

of art here is conceived as a breath crystal, an evanescent structure that appears and is effaced again with the passing of time.[23] At the border of being and not-being, the poem inhabits a twilight zone where all colours are absorbed into the monochrome undecidedness of grey. Also, hidden from sight but not from perception, there is another liminal space, suspended between the classical forms and the new forms that are the invisible countertext of the poem. DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH can be read as a *mise-en-abyme* of form being inscribed on form. Above all, however, it is a meditation on time, rhythm and the limits of seeing.

Metrical spaces

Rhythm is generally considered to be a less technical synonym for metre. Only few authors have proposed an approach that conceives of rhythm as an autonomous principle. First and foremost, Emile Benveniste and Henri Meschonnic have opened up new ways of thinking about the implications of rhythm and metre as distinct modalities or structures. In "La notion de « rythme » dans son expression linguistique," Benveniste traces the etymology of the word and shows that ῥυθμός did not originally denote the periodic alternation of tides but rather meant a kind of form unfolding in time. He also points out that the suffix -(θ)μός indicates "non l'accomplissement de la notion, mais la modalité particulière de son accomplissement, telle qu'elle se présente aux yeux": a becoming that unfolds before the eyes of an observer. There is no ambiguity in the original signification:

> […] ῥυθμός, d'après les contextes où il est donné, désigne la forme dans l'instant qu'elle est assumée par ce qui est mouvant, mobile, fluide, la forme de ce qui n'a pas consistance organique : il convient au *pattern* d'un élément fluide, à une

[23] On the *Atemkristall* or breath crystal, see Gadamer 1973, 152–153.

> lettre arbitrairement modelée, à un péplos qu'on arrange à son gré, à la disposition particulière du caractère ou de l'humeur. C'est la forme improvisée, momentanée, modifiable.[24]

Not until the age of Plato did rhythm become identified with a static form or schema and was tied to the idea of metrical alternation: "La circonstance décisive est là, dans la notion d'un 'ρυθμός corporel associée au μέτρον et soumis à la loi des nombres : cette « forme » est désormais déterminée par une « mesure » et assujettie à un ordre."[25] Based on this analysis, Meschonnic in studies like *Critique du rythme* or *La rime et la vie* attempts to refute the dualist view of (written) text and (oral) utterance as mutually exclusive modes of expression. Following Benveniste, he defines rhythm as a non-binary structuring principle of movement – "un traitement inégal de l'espace et du temps"[26] – that is opposed to metre and its spatial structure. Rhythm for Meschonnic becomes actualised in the spoken or written enunciation and has no abstract existence.[27] Neither iterable nor recurrent, rhythm is indissociable from the single, unique moment of speech.

In Persian, the term for metre, *'aruz*, is derived from the Arabic root *'-r-z*, which denotes a horizontal extension. Like the Greek and Latin metrical systems, classical Persian metre is quantitative, which means that its pattern is based on syllable weight or length rather than stress. Furthermore, each verse (*beyt*) in classical poetry is, according to the principle of symmetry, divided into two wings or half-lines (*mesra'*)

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[24] Benveniste 1966, 332–333. The article was first published in 1951 before being reprinted as part of *Problèmes de linguistique générale*.

[25] ibid., 334.

[26] Meschonnic 1982, 110.

[27] Meschonnic 2006, 310–340. • Secondary to living speech, the written sign comes *after*, invariably belated: Derrida's critique of phonocentrism in Western thought is well known. More than taking issue with the underlying duality *as such*, however, Derrida attacks the *hierarchisation* governing notions of the written and the oral in Western philosophy since Plato.

and has an ever-same number of feet (*arkān*).[28] However, a verse becomes recognisable as such only when it is embedded in a sequence of metrical patterns. Meschonnic writes:

> Un vers est une unité d'unités métriques. C'est par là une unité sérielle interne et externe: interne, en ce qu'elle constitue le vers lui-même; externe, dans la mesure où sauf citation isolée d'un vers connu, c'est à partir d'un deuxième vers, et dans une série qu'un vers est reconnu comme vers.[29]

Nimā broke up the diptych-like symmetry of the classical Persian verse and its regular count of feet but retained the basic idea of sub-metrical units, i.e. the units which – according to Meschonnic's analysis – constitute the internal series. In this way, the relationship between the poetic line and the poem as a whole was unsettled. Nimaean prosody (*vazn-e Nimā'i*)[30] alarmed the advocates of classical verse because it affected more than an isolated technical aspect of poetics: no simple dalliance with innovation, the reformed metre in fact changed the inner dynamics of the text and called for a new practice of reading.[31] On the one hand, Nimaean prosody destabilises the metric principle from inside and thwarts expectations which are kept alive by the continued presence of feet, however irregular.[32] On the other hand, the single verse ceases to be an

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[28] Akhavān (1376a, 88) states this clearly when he writes: "hameh-ye mesrā'-hā bāyad az heys-e te'dād-e arkān va afā'il mosavi bāshand va in mabnā-ye asāsi-ye dastgāh-e 'aruz-e fārsi va 'arabi-st." • Among the available studies, *A Manual of Classical Persian Prosody* by Finn Thiesen offers the clearest outline of *'aruz* as a metrical system. The works of L. P. Elwell-Sutton and P. N. Khānlari on classical metre also bear mention.

[29] Dessons and Meschonnic, 65.

[30] I am translating *vazn* here as prosody rather than metre. Shafi'i Kadkani also speaks of *'aruz-e āzād* (Shafi'i Kadkani 1376, 289). However, I believe the term *vazn* to be preferable as it connotes weight or emphasis and marks the transition from an abstract form to an aspect of poetic meaning. Shafi'i Kadkani (1376, 47–48) argues that *vazn* is instrumental in the communication of different affective states and therefore cannot be regarded as an isolated or external element.

[31] In the context of metaphor, Ricœur (1975, 301) speaks of "la résistance de l'habitude à l'innovation."

[32] On this matter see Akhavān 1376a, 80–84 and 88.

independent, self-contained unit and the rule that sentences must be co-extensive with the poetic line is relaxed. Instead, the borders between each verse and the poem as a whole become porous, which means that the poem can no longer be read as a sequence of contiguous verse-cells.[33] Sense and reference are conceived differently: Nimā imagines the poem as a space where relations of meaning operate not in linear progression but as a back-and-forth of possible significations, unfolding in time.

Within the context of classical poetry, metre also acted as a mnemonic device that superimposed a spatial pattern on speech.[34] Through the laws of symmetry and proportion, metre was tied to a certain idea of space: an orderly, Euclidean space of grids. In classical Persian verse, the metrical system projected an external order which had the power to override other structuring principles. In other words, the cyclical

[33] In his pioneering study *Sovar-e Khayāl*, Shafiʻi Kadkani (1378, 169–186) analyses the vertical and horizontal axes of imagery in classical poetry and laments the fact that traditionally, the verse (*beyt*) was considered the principle unit for poetic images while the coherence of imagery on the plane of the poem was neglected. While there certainly is such a tendency in classical poetry, Shafiʻi Kadkani's assessment is nevertheless highly schematic. • Ricœur (1975, 277) writes: "Le texte est une entité complexe de discours dont les caractères ne se réduisent pas à ceux de l'unité de discours ou phrase." Nimā shifts the relationship between the verses that make up the poem and the text as a whole conceived as *entité du discours*.

[34] See the work of Frances A. Yates and Mary Carruthers on the classical *ars memoria.* • Also, Shafiʻi Kadkani (1376, 288) mentions an interesting experiment: 130 members of a reading group were asked to note down any line of free verse that they knew by heart. Thirty persons cited fragments from poems by Ahmad Shāmlu while another thirty excused themselves for not remembering any free verse. The remaining seventy participants quoted from poems by Nimā, Akhavān or Forugh Farrokhzād. Remarkable about these results is that: 1) a large number of educated and literate persons were unable to cite any free verse; 2) only poems that Ahmad Shāmlu had recorded with his own voice were cited (parts or phrases); 3) the majority of participants could not distinguish between free verse and *vazn-e Nimā'i*; and 4) poems composed in *vazn-e Nimā'i* were more easily remembered than poems composed in free verse.

alternation or periodicity of classical metre created a sense – or illusion – of order that obscured the need for an immanent coherence of the poem.[35]

Persian *'aruz* knows about 120 different possible metrical combinations, all of which are conventionally associated with specific qualities or moods. However, precisely because metre constituted the principal binding agent in terms of form, the classical poet was not free to change his chosen metre at any point in the poem, even if a change of scene or characters might have necessitated a different metrical pattern.[36] Instead, individual speech was subordinated to the hegemonic mood, which left little room for subjectivation or the invention of an "I" in and through language conceived as discourse. What Akhavān calls the *sowq-e tabi'i-ye kalām* ("natural pull of speech")[37] was thus eclipsed by the scansion of a structural monophony.

Meschonnic seeks to refute the idea that orality belongs exclusively to the ephemeral presence of the spoken word. In fact, Meschonnic argues, the mechanisms that underlie speech also structure the written text.[38] Nimā throughout his writings speaks of what he regards as the artificial syntax of classical verse and laments the denial of oral structures in favour of highly sophisticated and complex textual edifices. For Nimā, classical metre subjects the syntax of Persian with its natural movement of

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[35] Adorno (1973, 420) speaks of "die immanente Stimmigkeit der Kunstwerke." • The case is different for mystical poetry, composed outside the courtly – scripted – framework of classical rhetoric.

[36] See Shafi'i Kadkani 1378, 214.

[37] Akhavān 1376a, 107. Akhavān in his theoretical writings on poetry invariably uses words other than *zabān* ("language" or "langue").

[38] It is significant in this context that many of Akhavān's poems are conceived as epics and therefore placed in the lineage of an essentially oral poetic genre. Poems like ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH or MARD-O MARKAB play with certain epic conventions (the figure of the bard, cyclical time, etc.). However, these poems are also profoundly literal and there is no doubt that they were intended to be read rather than staged. As Albert B. Lord shows in *The Singer of Tales*, orality is structurally inscribed on the epic text, even if a poem has been codified in writing.

thought and perception to a fundamentally exterior, transcendent principle that hinders rather than complements the production of meaning. Summarising the purpose of his reforms, Nimā writes:

> مقصود من جدا کردن شعر زبان فارسی از موسیقی آن است که با مفهوم شعر وصفی سازش ندارد. من عقیده ام بر این است که مخصوصاً شعر وصفی را از حیث طبیعت بیان، به طبیعت نثر نزدیک کرده، به آن اثر دلپذیر نثر را بدهم.

> I intend to separate Persian verse from its music, which is incompatible with descriptive poetry. My aim in bringing above all descriptive poetry stylistically closer to prose is to recreate the pleasant effect of prose.[39]

When he urges the poet to be guided by prose, Nimā breaks down a false dichotomy that places poetry outside the flow of spoken language and subjects it to the demands of metre. Yet, Nimā had no intention of abolishing prosody altogether. Rather, he called for a contingent, fluid structure or modality that could no longer be abstracted from the poem but emerges jointly with it: a flexible set of small metrical units, arranged according to the needs of the poet in a given instant. In contradistinction to metre, prosody as a rhythmic principle is founded on the indissoluble relationship between syntax and meaning: "La prosodie est faite d'oppositions relationnelles qui ont diversement des effets sémantiques et syntaxiques."[40] Understood this way, prosody is an autonomous strand of poetic meaning and enters into relations of consonance or dissonance with the syntactic structure of each sentence or phrase. Moments of tension

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[39] Nimā quoted in Akhavān 1376a, 116; see also Nimā 1351a, 30 and 44. • Dessons and Meschonnic (65) speak of "le conflit entre un discours, avec ses limites de mots, et un principe asémantique, musicologique." • Nimā's idea of *she'r-e vasfi* (neither narrative nor lyric) is directed against what he perceives as a general practice in classical poetry, namely that of basing descriptions not on actual experience but on inner-poetic allusions: for example, the description of a garden in classical poetry would refer not to a specific, contingent and singular garden in nature but act as the generic backdrop for a play of metaphors and intertextual references. (For a historical analysis of this matter, see Shafi'i Kadkani 1378, 208, 260, 266; and 317–326, on the description of nature in classical poetry.)

[40] Dessons and Meschonnic, 64.

and resolution become possible which are not occasioned by external constraints but unfold as part of a natural dialectic.

Significantly, Akhavān believes that metrical innovations are the source from which all other aspects of Nimā's poetics derive.[41] Indeed, the stakes in the reform of classical metre were higher than those regarding other aspects of poetic expression (subject matter and imagery). This fact seems borne out by the hostile reactions to the new prosody: reactions which cannot be reduced to a mere divergence of academic opinion. Rather, the heated nature of the debate suggests a proxy struggle over issues of transcendence and immanence. Nimā's concept of descriptive poetry with its postulate of lived perception – of writing after nature, as it were – is profoundly worldly. Contingent and flawed, poetry for Nimā produces ever-new images of a truth that only exists in representations: an irretrievable moment captured in time. Perhaps the explosiveness of Nimā's reforms can be located here, in their opposition to a Platonic dualism that places atemporal structures over their temporal manifestations. However, there is also a more narrowly political aspect to the search for a new prosody. Akhavān in a substantial essay on "Now'i Vazn dar She'r-e Fārsi" cites the metres of traditional folk songs (*tarāneh-ye mahalli*), threnodies (*nowheh*) and popular songs (*qowl* and *tasnif*) as examples of non-classical structuring patterns.[42] By and large unscripted, the metrical varieties found in folklore had for decades and centuries existed alongside classical poetry, in a social space outside the courtly environment. During the time of

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[41] Akhavān (1376a, 80) writes, "yeki az bed'at-hāye u owzān-e she'r-hāyash bud, va dar haqiqat mādar-e bed'at-hā va badāye'-e vey."

[42] Akhavān 1376a, 156–162. Complementing the list Akhavān adds: "vazn-e ma'ruf-e AFSĀNEH-ye Nimā dar yeki do tasnif-e 'Āref […] āmādeh" (ibid., 166); "nemuneh'i az tasnif-hāye emruzi ya'ni tarāneh-ye MORGH-E SAHAR sorudeh-ye Malek ol-Sho'arā' Bahār" (ibid., 168); "tasnif-hāye 'Āref" (ibid., 171–173). • Perhaps we can speak of an *ethnopoetology*, as a variation on the studies of folk music carried out by Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in the period between the two wars.

the Constitutional Revolution, these forms became associated with the democratic resistance movement. Above all, ʻĀref Qazvini (1259–1312) in his poetry gave political clout and intellectual dignity to the *tasnif*, which had previously been regarded as a humble preserve of the common people.[43]

Embodied rhythm

In *Duzakh, Ammā Sard* (1357), his penultimate collection of poetry, Akhavān lets a short explanatory essay precede six lyrical, haiku-like studies to which he gives the name *khosravāni*: a pre-Islamic poetic form that is largely hypothetical, documented by a single example of three lines.[44] In *Bedʻat-hā va Badāyeʻ* – published in the same year as *Duzakh, Ammā Sard* – Akhavān refers to a passage from Nimā's book *Do Nāmeh*:

> من روابط مادی و عینی در نظر گرفته ام و از گاتها - که فرمان اصلی است و اصلیت وزنی را در شعر ما داراست - شروع کرده ام.

[43] On the poetry and significance of ʻĀref Qazvini see Āryanpur 2:146–168 and Shafiʻi Kadkani 1390b, 392–403. ʻĀref was one of the first poets to make use of the *ghazal* to denounce social injustices and express national sentiments rather than individual, human love. Akhavān's *ghazal-mānand* is unthinkable without ʻĀref as precursor.

[44] Shafiʻi Kadkani devotes a section of *Musiqi-ye Sheʻr* (1376, 561–576) to "yeki az khosravāni-hāye Bārbad, kohantarin nemuneh-ye sheʻr-e fārsi." (Interestingly, Shafiʻi Kadkani refers to a "fairly comprehensive study" Akhavān had published on the *khosravāni* in the journal *Yaghmā*.) As Shafiʻi Kadkani notes, Persian poetry before the Arab conquest and the subsequent adoption of the Arabic *ʻaruz* system was probably syllabic. Only one example of the *khosravāni* has come down to us while it can be inferred from various sources that the term itself must have denoted a kind of hymn sung in praise of the king (*khosrow*). Formally, the *khosravāni* was described by early commentators as cast in rhymed, rhythmically structured prose. However, Shafiʻi Kadkani argues, after *ʻaruz* had superseded the Sassanian metrical system, commentators may no longer have been able to discern a syllabic metre as such. For this reason, they may have wrongly characterised the *khosravāni* as a prose genre rather than poetry.

> Considering material and objective connections I started out from the Gathas – which are the main point of reference and retain metrical authenticity in our poetry.[45]

Both Nimā and Akhavān hearken back to literary forms which antedate the introduction of the Arabic metrical system, be it the *khosravāni* or the Zoroastrian Gathas. Such poetic archaeologies are indicative of a desire to locate an old-new origin: a point from which a counter-tradition can be established. Whether such an origin is in fact imaginary, a spectral precedent of legend, has little importance. Modernity arises from the search for a beginning. It is marked by a historical self-awareness and a sense of time as the distance that separates a human subject from his or her past: a past which enters the narrative of the speaking "I" and is thereby owned. Akhavān's most emblematic poetry collections, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* and *Az in Avestā*, likewise belong here, in the force field of origin and *now*. With their titles, they consciously inscribe themselves in a poetic lineage that goes back to a semi-mythological age, be it the immemorial sacred texts of Zoroaster or the Persian national epic, on the threshold of epochs. By invoking their literary ancestors Akhavān's books do not succumb to a nostalgic yearning for what is gone. Rather, they establish a continuity, however imaginary, and layer text upon text. Unfinished and unfinishable palimpsest, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* and *Az in Avestā* speak from the *now* of a modernity conceived as "présence indéfiniment continuée au présent":[46] a modernity, also, whose tradition is constantly re-invented.

In the search for a new mould of poetry much more was at stake than form itself. Language, poetic or otherwise, always belongs to an "I" and is realised in speech as

[45] Nimā quoted in Akhavān 1376a, 115.

[46] Dessons and Meschonnic, 46.

"l'activité de qui parle ou écrit."[47] Also, because the moment of speech is, by its nature, embedded in the wider framework of history, the "I" cannot but speak as a historical subject. For this reason, the conflicts staged over the definition of metaphor and metre in the 1320s and 1330s should not be dismissed as formalistic squabbles that concerned only a small circle of initiate scholars and poets. All parties involved in the struggle for a poetic renewal consciously or unconsciously understood that they were not falling out over accidentals.[48] In this sense, too, Nimā's claim to have considered *ravābet-e māddi va 'eyni* points to a deep insight about the preconditions for a new poetics: the past had to be recreated and written *into* the present. Yet, which or whose past? There was – and is – no single answer.

Akhavān in the preface to the second edition of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* speaks of his experiments with unmetrified pieces (*qata'āt-e bi-vazn*). Just three of these little experiments (*āzmāyeshaki*) were eventually published and plainly, all lack the density and gravitational pull that is otherwise characteristic of Akhavān's language. Well aware of the relative failure of these pieces Akhavān still decided to include them in the book, as instances of a road not taken.

> ولی آنگونه سخنان بهر حال مثل اینکه یک چیزی کم دارد از شعر، [...] همان جاری مترنم ارواح و قرایح موزون، که ریتم ملفوظ، ریتم مکالم و متکلم است.
>
> But it seems that such discourses somehow fall short of poetry, [...] that same lyric flow of tempered spirits and dispositions which is worded rhythm, speaking and conversing rhythm.

What is put forth here can no longer be reconciled with the traditional idea of *'aruz.* Rather, Akhavān defines rhythm in the sense of Benveniste and Meschonnic. There is no agent in "that same lyric flow" (*hamān jāri-ye motarannem*) and no thing is left that

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[47] ibid., 31.

[48] The proceedings of the *Nokhostin Kongreh-ye Nevisandegān-e Irān* of 1326 are a fascinating document in this respect.

flows. Only a lone present participle tells of a state or modality of existence: flowing. Metre has ceded its place to rhythm conceived as "l'organisation du continu dans le langage."[49]

Meschonnic clearly delineates the temporal nexus of speech, subjectivity, body, rhythm and prosody when he writes:

> L'oralité est alors le mode de signifier où le sujet rythme, c'est-à-dire subjective au maximum sa parole. Le rythme et la prosodie y font ce que la physique et la gestuelle du parlé font dans la parole parlée. Ils sont ce que le langage écrit peut porter du corps, de corporalisation, dans son organisation écrite.[50]

Rhythm here is thought as that which carries the corporeality of a speaking "I" over to the written word. Beyond any metaphysics of presence, language itself is marked with the turns of breath, pauses and stammering hesitations but also the impetuosities, joyful accelerations and reckless momentum of speech: *hamān jāri-ye motarannem.* Words that may never have been voiced in address become witnesses of lived speech. The opening of Akhavān's GHAZAL 3 (1338, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) is perhaps the most beautiful example of rhythm as a temporal structure, emerging with and in the speech of an "I":

ای تکیه گاه و پناهِ
زیباترین لحظه های
پر عصمت و پر شکوه
تنهائی و خلوت من !

oh pillar and refuge
of the most beautiful moments
full of chastity and splendour
of my solitude and seclusion!

No longer determined by a prescribed number of feet, the length of the poetic line is instead bounded by the length of the human breath: it cannot be cut or interrupted

[49] Meschonnic 1995, 143.

[50] Dessons and Meschonnic, 46.

without the utterance being reduced to a meaningless stammer. The body of the speaking "I" is inscribed on the poem itself, structurally indissociable from the text. Irrespective of whether the poem's words are actualised by a reader, orality is the very principle that underlies the text's syntactic organisation. In its pauses and silences sounds are allowed to reverberate while words are paced by the movement of breath. (It can be no coincidence that GHAZAL 3 is also one of Akhavān's rare love poems.)

In SORUD-E PANĀHANDEH (1334, *Zemestān*), an otherwise unremarkable work, something strange happens poetically:

آه
اینجا منم، منم
کز خویشتن نفورم و با دوست دشمنم ... »

oh
here I am, I am
I, who despise myself and have hate for the friend … »

The repetition of *manam, manam* both doubles and cancels out, as it were, the initial assertion of the speaking "I" and turns it into a lifeless echo, a stammer, a babble.

- « راهم ... دهید آی ! ... پناهم دهید ... آی !
هو .. هوی ... های .. های ... »

– « let me … in oh ! … give me shelter … oh!
hoo .. hooui … how … how … »

There is no-one to answer and thereby break the closed circuit of an "I" involuted on itself, in perfect symmetry: *manam*. The "I"s interlocutor is the spectre of speech itself: a delusion that makes the act of speaking possible while the *other* – the "you" addressed as a *Hörstdu* – remains forever silent. With words dissolving into barely articulated sounds, slipping below the threshold of sense, into the realm of the infra-semantic, a mechanism (an existential plight?) is placed into relief that will take on the semblance of meaning in Akhavān's later, narrative poems.

Measures of seeing

In *Rythmes – de l'œuvre de la traduction et de la psychanalyse* Nicolas Abraham analyses the connection between human consciousness and rhythm as a phenomenon in the Husserlian sense. He distinguishes between two ways of perceiving, of structuring time and of anticipating what is to come in the future. To him, a double temporality lies at the heart of the literary utterance, where time is split into the objective, measurable time of physics and the virtual time of rhythm as perceived by a human subject. He notes that "il est tout à fait erroné de parler de perception du rythme ou de 'rythme perçu.' Ce qui a lieu en fait, c'est la rythmisation de la perception, un création au sein d'une conscience d'irréel."[51] Perception – human consciousness – is what forges the link between objective time and the time of rhythm by braiding together two strands of a single ontological category.

While his analysis appears to be pulling away from dualist perceptions, Abraham still holds on to a notion of rhythm as extrinsic to poetic speech: a structure that is separate – or, at the very least, separable – from what it defines. However, by introducing the notion of "terme" he opens the way for a tensional conception of rhythm: "contrairement au pied spatial et statique de la prosodie quantitative, le terme est une unité dynamique vectorielle, caractérisée par une tension croissante, orientée vers l'achèvement."[52] As the self-contained metrical cell is replaced by a unit that points beyond and ahead of itself, prosody ceases to be locked in a spatial conception of time,

[51] Abraham, 80. Of course, Abraham was not the first to point out this double temporality at work in literature. *Rythmes* was published in 1993, ten years after the first volume of Paul Ricœur's seminal study *Temps et récit* appeared. Ricœur himself is indebted to Benveniste.

[52] Abraham, 86.

solidified in periodic alternation and repetition. Instead, poetic time – rhythm – comes to be defined as a directional, even musical structure of tension seeking to be resolved. A structure that is meaningful only if perceived by an "I," expectant and conscious of "l'intentionnalité de cette attente."[53]

RI RĀ (1331): the poem's name is an interpellation, the sound-sign of an incipience, of speech – and dialogue – projected. A word also that is not Persian and thus necessarily strange and puzzling to anyone outside of Nimā's native Mazandaran:[54]

« ری را » ... صدا میاید امشب
از پشت « کاچ » که بند آب
برق سیاه تابش تصویری از خراب
در چشم می کشاند.
گویا کسی است که می خواند ...

« ri rā » ... a voice sounds tonight
from behind the *kāch* where the dam
with the glitter of its deluminescence
draws an image of ruin in the eye
as if someone were singing ...[55]

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[53] ibid., 79.

[54] Qezvānchāhi (253–255) gives the meaning of *ri rā* as "ho!" or "be alert!" and notes that *Ri Rā* is also a female name. Significantly again, Nimā himself – while placing the non-Persian term between inverted commas and thus marking it as foreign – provides no explanation or footnote to his poem.

[55] According to Qezvanchāhi (266–277) *kāch* denotes a coppice within a paddock. It is virtually impossible to render the poem in another language as Nimā here plays with the syntactic and lexical possibilities of Persian to create an extreme density of metaphor and reference. The paradoxical image of *barq-e siāh-tābash* – vaguely reminiscent of Paul Celan's *schwarze Milch der Frühe* but also of mediaeval Persian mystical discourses (without, however, the metaphysical implications of what 'Ayn ol-Qozāt calls *nur-e siāh-e eblis*) – could be literally translated as black-shining glitter. I have chosen to translate *siāh-tāb* as *deluminescence* to capture the unsettling, almost Derridean force of the expression. It should also be noted that Nimā uses the adjective *kharāb* ("ruined") in place of the noun *kharābi* ("ruin"). Finally, the fact that *sedā* in Persian can denote both a (human, animal) voice and a (non-human) sound creates a state of suspension – the identity of the (animate) speaker or (inanimate) source of sound remains unknown – that cannot be rendered in English.

These lines enact the structure of tension and resolution that Abraham regards as the essence of rhythm: a structure of relation, in time and in space, and of listening – "tendu vers un sens possible"[56] – for a meaning that is still to come. As each word leads to another within the logic of syntax, perception too follows a rhythmic arc that guides the reader through the space of the poem, from what is seen or conjectured to the memory of a past. Throughout, however, there is a disorienting contrast between the irrefutable *thereness* of a voice and the unreal, phantasmagorical images the same voice evokes. As in SHAB HAMEH SHAB, the origin of the voice is obscure and all sounds arise from an elsewhere, a beyond to which the listening "I" is drawn. The poems ends enigmatically, like a riddle:

او نیست با خودش،
او رفته با صدایش اما
خواندن نمی تواند.

it is not with itself,
it has gone with its voice yet still
cannot sing.

Who is gone, who cannot sing? We only know – or think we know – that there is no human subject. Still, an uncertainty lingers. Persian has no need to rescind ontological ambiguities. Instead, the question of human or non-human origin is left undecided. Nimā's poem is about the indeterminate, aboriginal nature of poetry. Like poetic speech, *ri rā* is the voice of an "I" that no longer exists. It is the trace of a presence in words and in rhythm, half-animate sound: a reflection of ruin in the eye.

Time and perception are already split in Nimā's earlier poems such as JOGHDI PIR (1320):

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[56] "Si « entendre », c'est comprendre le sens (soit au sens dit figuré, soit au sens dit propre : entendre une sirène, un oiseau ou un tambour, c'est chaque fois déjà comprendre le sens d'une situation, un contexte sinon un texte), écouter, c'est être tendu vers un sens possible, et par conséquent non immédiatement accessible" (Nancy 2002, 19).

هیس ! مبادا سخنی، جغدی پیر
پای در قیر به ره دارد گوش.

hush! not a word, an old owl
its feet in pitch listens out to the road.

Two disparate temporalities co-exist in the force field of poetic speech and the silent expectancy of tidings: the time of the moment and that of the unknown voice for which the old owl is listening out. Yet the voice belongs to an indefinite, utopian point in the future.[57] The owl's deadlock – its feet trapped in pitch – is the temporal prison of a *now* that will not recede: an inexorable stillness of time that foreshadows Akhavān, for whom the present after 1333 becomes a calvary without bounds or horizon.

Time and song

Non-human, half-animate voices pervade Nimā's and Akhavān's poems as expressions without signification and signifiers without signified that bypass the Saussurean dichotomy. Thus, in Nimā's PĀS-HĀ AZ SHAB GOZASHTEH AST (1336) the instrument puts forth no words yet continues to sing:

مانده زندانی به لبهایش
بس فراوان حرفها، اما
با نوای نای خود در این شب تاریک پیوسته
چون سرا غ از هیچ زندانی نمی گیرد
میزبان در خانه اش تنها نشسته.

imprisoned between his lips are still
countless words, yet
there is no trace of a prisoner and the host
with the song of his *ney* continously
abides at home by himself.

[57] The futile – unanswered and unanswerable – questions of Nimā's DĀRVAG (n.d.) and Akhavān's QĀSEDAK (1338, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) belong to the same *uchronia*.

The noise of *ti-tik ti-tik* produced by the black beetle knocking on the windowpane in SIULISHEH (1335) or the *chuk-o chuk* of SHAB-PAREH-YE SĀHEL-E NAZDIK ("shabpareh-ye sāhel-e nazdik bā man (ru-ye harfash gong) miguyad"): these messages remain obscure so long as we look for a signification beyond their material presence as song. In other words, while the sounds of the beetle and bat may carry no evident, objective meaning, the very fact that they are sent out and addressed – hypothetically – to an Other creates a signification that transcends the phonetic sign itself.

In one of Nimā's most famous poems, KHORUS MIKH^{W}ĀNAD (1325), the cockerel's matutinal song becomes subject as the unfolding of a voice is traced:

قو قو لی قو ! خروس میخواند
از درون نهفت خلوت ده،
از نشیب رهی که چون رگ خشک،
در تنِ مردگان دواند خون
می تَنَد بر جدار سرد سَحر
می تراود به هر سوی هامون.

qu qu li qu! the cockerel calls
from the hidden secluded core of the village,
from the slope of a path that like a shrivelled vein
makes blood run through dead bodies,
weaves its web on the cold wall of dawn,
seeps to all sides of the steppe.

What is expressed in the cockerel's song? It is a substance, a fluid, protean materiality that seeps and brings about a transformation as it spreads through the landscape at dawn.

Conceived as a material being, the night in Akhavān's masterpiece NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? (1343, *Az in Avestā*) has become autonomous, detached from what it seems to denote: the period of darkness which, as a temporal, transient space, intervenes between one day and another. At the same time, the shadow – subordinate, minor darkness of day – is divorced from its bearer and addressed as a separate entity:

شب خسته بود از درنگ سیاهش
من سایه ام را به میخانه بردم

the night was weary of its black deferral
I took my shadow along to the tavern

Strange and ambiguous figure, the night stands in complete stillness, as if the absence of a possible morning had been congealed into an inescapable, lightless, unchanging *now*. Nothing moves forward – is able to move – but the shadow. Time, if it passes at all, passes elsewhere.

QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN (1339, *Az in Avestā*) opens with an image whose point of view is oddly skewed. There is no realistic perspective but rather a movement that swings back and forth as it follows the characters and their speech:

دو تا کفتر
نشسته اند روی شاخه سدر کهنسالی
که روییده غریب از همگنان در دامن کوه قوی پیکر.

two doves
are perched on the branches of an old cedar
rooted far from its peers on the slopes of a towering mountain

The empty landscape offers little comfort or orientation. It is a topography where nothing exists but distances and spatial relations that detach and alienate the old cedar tree (*gharib*): from what, from whom? (Who are the tree's equals, its peers?)

سخن میگفت، سر در غار کرده، شهریار شهر سنگستان
سخن میگفت با تاریکی خلوت.
[...]
حزین آوای او در غار می گشت و صدا می کرد.

- « ... غم دل با تو گویم، غار !
بگو آیا مرا دیگر امید رستگاری نیست ؟ »
صدا نالنده پاسخ داد :
« ... آری نیست ؟ »

the prince of stoneland spoke, his head stuck in the cave
he spoke to the forlorn darkness
[...]
his sorrowful call circled and hailed in the cave.

– « … cave, let me tell you my grief!
tell me, is all hope of salvation now gone? »
the voice responded plaintively:
« … now gone? »

The voice – or sound (significantly, Persian does not distinguish) – is thrown back, reflected as a stunted echo: « …āri nist ? » Cut off from its origin, the echo remains forever estranged while the voice, once human, is reduced to an inanimate husk of sound. Exile is irremediable. There is no hope of salvation.[58]

The quail in ĀVĀZ-E KARAK (1335, *Zemestān*) sings a song whose sense the little bird does not understand:

- « بده ... بدبد .. چه امّیدی ؟ چه ایمانی ؟ .. »

•

- « ... کرک جان ! خوب میخوانی.
من این آواز پاکت را درین غمگین خراب آباد،
چو بوی بالهای سوخته ت پرواز خواهم داد.
گرت دستی دهد با خویش در دنجی فراهم باش.
بخوان آواز تلخت را، ولیکن دل بغم مسپار.
کرک جان ! بنده دم باش ... »

– « … it's bad .. bad bad.. what hope? what faith? .. »

•

– « *karak* dear! you sing well.
I'll let this pure song of yours soar in this desolate place
like the smell of your burnt wings.
be prepared in a cranny, if the chance arises.
sing your bitter song but don't give in to grief.
karak dear! live for the moment … »

There is a voice, a song: does it have any meaning, does it signify anything? In a footnote Akhavān explains that the quail is also called *bad badeh* (which, colloquially pronounced, means "it's bad, bad") after its courtship call, rendered this way. He goes

[58] Shafi'i Kadkani (1376, 72–73) refers to QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN as "in she'r-e Omid ke jān-e kalām va honar-e shā'er dar kalameh-ye qāfiyeh mojassam shodeh'ast" and, a little further down, adds: "gāhi in tashakhkhos va emtiāz rā dar qāfiyeh barāye ān ijād mikonand ke qāfiyeh 'alāveh bar ma'ni-ye khʷod az nazar-e sowti niz be adā-ye mafhum komak mikonad." Elsewhere (1390a, 172) Shafi'i Kadkani points out that the figure of speaking doves originates in Iranian folklore.

on to say that the same call is used by hunters to decoy the bird into their nets. It is a treacherous voice, therefore, or rather, a voice whose sense has been estranged and abused.

In ĀVĀZ-E KARAK three voices interweave and are at various points interrupted, fragmented or layered into each other: the voice of the caged bird and its bitter song, the voice of an unknown speaker who offers vacuous advice and the voice, undeclared, of the poet who gives resonance to his characters without foreclosing their speech. Nimā and Akhavān are unique in modern Persian literature for the polyphonic structure of their writing. In Nimā's poems the individual lines of perception never lose their autonomy but rather combine to create a texture of sounds and possible significations unfolding in time. Akhavān's early works are more lyrical and less complex in their expression. However, a turning point can be discerned around 1333, midway through *Zemestān*. The poems composed after this date are notably different in form, imagery, tone and the way time and space are conceived. The walls between text and outside-text appear to have become porous. What accounts for this rupture? Next to the date of their composition – Āzar and Shahrivar 1333 – the poems FARYĀD and FARĀMUSH bear the name of a place: prison "M." After the *coup d'état* against Mosaddeq, Akhavān was on two occasions jailed for his political involvement.[59] During his second imprisonment in the winter of 1333, a traumatic experience that all but shattered a life, Akhavān devoted himself to the study of Nimā's poetics. The first poems to emerge from this intellectual and existential shock, FARYĀD and FARĀMUSH, are remarkable above all for the raw expression of their despair and do not yet show the signs of a poetic transformation.

[59] In a letter to Mohammad Qahramān, Akhavān mentions some details of his arrest (see Qahramān, 86–92).

Still, they mark the threshold to a different kind of writing: a writing whose emblem is ĀVĀZ-E KARAK with its resonance space of voices weaving in and out of each other.

The polyphony of voices in Nimā's and Akhavān's poems is also an imbrication of temporal layers through a multiple exposure of the present moment. Benveniste defines speech acts as "les actes discrets et chaque fois uniques par lesquels la langue est actualisée en paroles par un locuteur."[60] In the poem, the enunciation is doubled, there at once as an origin and its shadow, autonomous and real: the initial speech act of an "I" and the moment of reading in which the enunciation is not repeated but renewed. While the cockerel in KHORUS MIKH^{W}ĀNAD never crowed, the narrator in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? never told the story of his nocturnal perambulations and the quail in ĀVĀZ-E KARAK never sang a song of imprisonment, all these enunciations nevertheless exist as potential oralities within the structure of the poem. Irrespective of their imaginary origin, they are instances of speech and as such have entered, died into the text. Whenever a poem is read, the original act of enunciation is iterated, same and other. Yet, the instances do not merge and must be perceived as separate: the time of the poem and that of reading belong to their own, discrete moments in history.

The polyphonic weave of Nimā's and Akhavān's texts can be seen to enact a compossibility defined as the existence of various equipotential worlds within the metaphorical space of the poem.[61] The voices resonating through poems like RI RĀ or QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN do indeed suggest a convergence of mutually exclusive

[60] Benveniste 1966, 251.

[61] Bowie (47) writes of *Prose pour des Esseintes*: "Mallarmé, in making this fictional world, was by no means strict to that law of 'compossibility' which, according to Leibniz, the divine creator himself chose to observe: the poet is quite willing to allow incompatible or mutually exclusive states of affairs to exist at once and in one place. He does not present us with one world held to be real, surrounded by enticing or distressing other worlds held to be virtual. His poem defines a region which is, in a phrase of Proust's, 'une et pourtant alternative,' a region where equipotential worlds converge."

worlds and perspectives. However, some of these worlds are enclosed in a space that is categorically without reach, accessible only to the imagination: the black glitter of water in RI RĀ is not observed but imagined, a phantasm evoked by a voice that hails from an unknown source. In Akhavān's poems, the other, possible worlds belong to a different time-space: the time-space of myth, fundamentally messianic in the sense of an eschatology without God – a structure of futile expectancy – that determines the *now*. Utopian and transcendent, beyond human speech, the space traversed by the the nameless wayfarers in CHĀVUSHI is a mute realm of shadows:

در آن مهگون فضای خلوت افسانگیشان راه می پویند، ما هم راه خود را میکنیم آغاز.

through their misty space of legend they travel, we too shall start out on our way.

Like parallel lines that meet at the vanishing point of perspective, the time of myth and our time are compossible nowhere but in the poem.

CHAPTER 2
IMAGES OF THE NEW

In this chapter we shall seek to show that the poetic image or metaphor in Nimā and Akhavān is not a mere trope, defined by the substitution of a word used in the so-called literal sense for another word, used figuratively. Rather, the image in Nimā's and Akhavān's poems is indissociable from language as the substance that allows a sensory perception to be redescribed. Over the following pages we shall explore the ways in which an extra-poetic reality is relayed to the poem. This essentially corresponds to the problem of *mimêsis* as set forth in Aristotle's *Poetics* and thus also extends to the relation among different ontological orders. Our argument throughout will be guided by Paul Ricœur's seminal study *La métaphore vive*, which locates a fundamental tension at the heart of metaphor itself:

> Être comme […] signifie être et n'être pas. C'est ainsi que le dynamisme de la signification donnait accès à la vision dynamique de la réalité qui est l'ontologie implicite de l'ontologie métaphorique.[62]

What is at stake in the definition of *mimêsis* is a belief in the poem's referential force: its ability to speak of a reality and thereby constitute itself as real. Nimā and Akhavān in their poems, while rarely political in prescriptive or ideological terms, take an ethical stance. Their theoretical writings attest that the struggle for a new poetics should be understood as the search for a different, new way of thinking the relationship between language and reality. Metaphor here constitutes the *locus* where the encounter between a perceiving mind and the object of perception comes into sight as an unstable relation in time.

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[62] Ricœur 1975, 376.

The chapter is divided into four sections that examine how metaphor and its relationship to reality were conceptualised at various moments in Persian literary history. The sections alternate between close readings of poems and analyses of Nimā's and Akhavān's essays on questions of poetics. Throughout, our discussion rests on a play of relays and perspectives. By retracing Nimā's postulate of the poetic image as a material, worldly entity we hope to shed light on how this idea is upheld and evolved by Akhavān. In order to understand Nimā's theoretical position it will be necessary to look at classical poetry and poetics through his eyes. How does Nimā judge the tradition and, importantly, to what extent do his views perpetuate – knowingly? – certain orthodoxies in Persian literary criticism? It seems that his critique is not so much aimed at classical poetry itself but rather at the conceptual framework that classical rhetoric used to impose on the nexus of world, representation and text. However, this distinction is never explicitly acknowledged. Once the stakes of classical and new definitions of metaphor have been outlined, we shall try to elucidate Akhavān's explication and passionate advocacy of Nimā's poetics. Akhavān's first engagement with Nimā can be dated to the year 1333: by that time, Nimā's most famous poems had been written and most of his important theoretical texts (*Arzesh-e Ehsāsāt*, *Panj Maqāleh dar She‘r va Namāyesh* and *Ta‘rif va Tabsereh*; *Harf-hāye Hamsāyeh* would follow in 1334) had been published. Interestingly, Akhavān in his own approach to classical poetry was less beholden to received opinion and therefore had no need to resort to polemical generalisations. In fact, his theoretical writings are unique in their breadth and scope and also their disregard for ingrained dichotomies of high (courtly or mystical) and low (satirical) literature. Akhavān's vision is indebted to Nimā yet his analyses overcome the rhetorical dualism that pitches old against new. In studies like *Bed‘at-hā va Badāye‘*

and *'Atā va Leqā-ye Nimā Yushij* or the collected essays, the idea of a categorical rupture between classical and modern literature loses its neat persuasiveness.

The relays of perspective are not easily disentangled and some of the questions addressed in the course of our discussion will remain without definite answer. However, the fact that these questions are identified and articulated may in itself be of value. Again, it bears emphasis that a certain way of thinking about language and representation stood in the way of poetic reform, not classical poetry itself. Nimā's and Akhavān's theoretical writings should therefore be appreciated as a vital contribution to the renewal of both literature and literary criticism in Iran. Akhavān's essays in particular helped to establish a new poetic idiom and also, importantly, freed classical poetry of many time-honoured interpretative conventions. However, it is in Nimā's and Akhavān's poems that the new ideas are placed before the eyes, as it were, and become a tangible presence. Works like Nimā's ANDUHNĀK-E SHAB (1319) or KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ (1325) and Akhavān's ANDUH (1333), MIRĀS (1335), HASTAN (1335) or ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH (1336) are witness to an understanding of metaphor that can no longer be contained within the categories of classical rhetoric. Rather, these poems enact the fleeting materiality of the poetic image as a coincidence of incongruous elements, an improbable relation, a manifest, irrefutable *thereness* or the memorial token of a lost past.

The screen of nature

In *Harf-hāye Hamsāyeh*, a collection of fictional letters composed between 1318 and 1334, Nimā speaks of the necessity of seeing and learning to see. Nimā holds that the images of classical poetry are born out of rational deliberation and therefore only tenuously linked to exterior reality. Against what he regards as the artificial detachment

of classicism, Nimā calls for a poetry that describes and represents, based on sensory impressions. He writes:

> ملت ما دید خوب ندارد. عادت ملت ما نیست که به خارج توجه داشته باشد، بلکه نظر او همیشه به حالت درونی خود بوده است. در ادبیات و بهمپای آن در موسیقی، که بیان می کنند، نه وصف. شلوغ پلوغی در اشعار وصفی ما هم به همین نسبت است. [...] این گوینده که از خارج رو گردان است در عین بهره گرفتن وصف از خارج، باز به درون خود می پردازد.

> Our people have no good vision. They are not used to looking at the outside world, instead, they have always been focused on their own inner state. In our literature and likewise in music, people express, they don't describe. The hotchpotch in our descriptive poems is down to the same reason. […] a poet who turns away from the outside world, while using it for descriptions, still attends to his own interiority.[63]

For Nimā, the thread relaying the world to the poet's mind as the poem emerges must not be cut but rather sustained as a vital connection.[64] Ricœur says that "l'acte poétique consiste à percevoir, non à représenter,"[65] and, elsewhere, "ce mouvement de référence est inséparable de la dimension créatrice. La *mimêsis* est *poiêsis*, et réciproquement."[66] Throughout his theoretical texts, Nimā insists on the necessity of seeing as the referential act that gives rise to the poem. For him, poetry is constituted in a perpetual back and forth between text and phenomenal world.

Mohammad Rezā Shafi'i Kadkani in *Sovar-e Khayāl dar She'r-e Fārsi*, his foundational study on metaphor in mediaeval and pre-modern Persian literature, argues that poetry in the first classical period was a portrayal of nature existing in and for itself before a subtle shift occurred in the mid 5th century h.q., when poets began to

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[63] Nimā 1351a, 47–48. Nimā's letters to his imaginary neighbour are probably inspired by Rilke's *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, which date from between 1903 and 1908 and were first published in 1928.

[64] He writes: "bāyad bār-hā in mobādeleh anjām begirad" (ibid., 7–8).

[65] Ricœur 1975, 99.

[66] ibid., 56.

array an increasingly baroque and artificial microcosm.[67] That is to say, the images of later classical poetry do not arise from direct observation or experience. Rather, nature is regarded as a space where metaphors are allowed to run wild: a world of the *as if*, governed by rhetoric and the implicit law that a poet's images should be recognisable within a wider genealogy of tropes.[68] Thus, when two phenomena are described that would never occur simultaneously in nature, such as a rainbow and falling snow, poetic discourse is not anchored in an extra-poetic reality but self-referentially turned in on itself.[69] In the absence of a stable referent outside the poetic system, images are no longer answerable as reflections or imitations of nature. Shafiʿi Kadkani maintains that this disregard for the act of representation accounts for the heterogeneous character of imagery in later classical poetry. It should be noted here that the narrative of origin and decadence proposed by Shafiʿi Kadkani, irrespective of its analytical merits, relies on a certain orthodoxy in Persian literary criticism, dating from around the time of the Constitutional Revolution. However, the same narrative provides the foil against which Nimā was able to set forth his poetics. In fact, Nimā's criticism is not primarily directed at classical poetry – which he knew intimately – but rather, by implication, at a common scholarly approach. He was aware that time-honoured perspectives on literature would have to be shifted in order for a different, new way of writing to gain acceptance and thrive.

Shafiʿi Kadkani calls the earliest poems (until the end of the 5th century h.q.) "objective and directed towards the outside world. That is, the poet's vision tends to move over the surface of things and is less concerned with psychological or affective

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[67] Shafiʿi Kadkani 1378, 321–322.

[68] ibid., 210 and 253.

[69] ibid., 196; also see 208–209.

aspects beyond the screen of nature and the material elements of existence."[70] Moving over the surface of things: Nimā's is a poetry of nature too, yet the categories of surface and depth no longer hold. Nimā does not search for a semantic dimension beyond the screen of nature. For him, the phenomena of the exterior world are always already shaped by the perceiving mind. In other words, *poiêsis* does not unfold in distinct stages of a first objective description that is later imbued with affective meaning. Outside and inside are not opposed but interdependent, even interchangeable, as in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's example of the right and left hands touching each other.[71] Where does the screen end that separates the "I" from what it perceives? Where does perception itself break off and the human subject turn into a mere chronicler of sensory data? Is there, can there be such a point?

While scenes of nature pervade Nimā's poetry, the achievements and frailties of modern civilisation are a conspicuous absence. Or rather, modernity is never called by its name, which may be the fundamental paradox of these poems. There is no mention of cities, no material trace of modern life, no human presence that could be ascribed to an industrial age. The historical moment at the origin of PEY-E DĀRU CHUPĀN, RI RĀ or TO RĀ MAN CHASHM DAR RĀHAM is revealed not in the lexical or material paraphernalia of modernity, as with some poets of the Constitutional Revolution, but in the mode of reference that these poems enact. Even the ostensible withdrawal of the human subject

[70] Shafi'i Kadkani's categorisation of objective and material surface as opposed to psychological and affective depth follows a Platonic dualism that underlies most Persian literary criticism of the past decades. In the original, the passage reads: "she'r-e fārsi dar in dowreh she'ri ast āfāqi (objective) va borun-garā. ya'ni did-e shā'er bishtar dar sath-e ashyā' jaryān dārad va dar varā-ye pardeh-ye tabi'at va 'anāser-e māddi-ye hasti, chizi nafsāni va 'ātefi kamtar mijuyad" (Shafi'i Kadkani 1378, 317).

[71] The touching hands are the foundational metaphor in "L'entrelacs – Le chiasme," perhaps the most important chapter of *Le visible et l'invisible.* Merleau-Ponty here tries to think identity *in* difference, beyond the partition of outside and inside, *voyant* and *visible*, self and other, sign and sense. Possessed of and tied to a body, the mind is necessarily part of the physical world it perceives.

in a text like DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH, tells of an affective bond: a bond of alienation and loneliness, perhaps pride, disenchantment and defeat. The same quiet atomisation of an "I" that has ceased to belong also underlies Akhavān's poems and makes up their specific modernity. Not *what* is seen and described is significant but *how* the "I" relates to the world in which it is embedded. The possibility or impossibility of love, God and political resistance manifest themselves in this relation. Akhavān, even though he follows his own autonomous path, is heir to Nimā in the belief that the poem emerges in the interstices of world and consciousness: there, in the ever-changing force field of history, the image and its referent – reality – keep being reframed by a human mind.

Porous images

When Akhavān says in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*),

قرن خون آشام،
قرن وحشتناک تر پیغام،
کاندران با فضله موهوم مرغ دور پروازی
چار رکن هفت اقلیم خدا را در زمانی بر می آشوبند.

> the vampiric century
> century of the most horrific message
> in which the four pillars of God's seven climes are all at once shaken
> by the phantasmal droppings of a far-flying bird.

metaphor is most alive and startling. The distance of the image from its referent could not be greater: the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 are figured as sinister bird droppings. Yet, the very conjunction of two incommensurable elements in the poetic utterance produces the disturbing effect of the metaphor: it is the emblem of a fundamentally modern tragedy, defying reason. On the lexical level, the poem's language is highly archaic or, more properly, archaising. It is a language that is profoundly heteroglot and estranged from itself.

The poem opens with the lines:

این شکسته چنگِ بی قانون،
رام چنگ چنگی شوریده رنگ پیر،
گاه گوئی خواب می بیند.
خویش را در بارگاه پر فروغ مهر
طرفه چشم انداز شاد و شاهدِ زرتشت،
یا پریزادی چمان سر مست
در چمنزارانِ پاک و روشن مهتاب می بیند.

this cracked, frameless lyre
pliant to the hands of the old ashen-faced bard,
sometimes it seems to dream.
it sees itself at the luminous court of the sun
a wondrous sight, joyous and witness to Zarathustra,
or as a *peri*, striding raptly
over chaste, moonlit meadows.

The speaking voices here as elsewhere in the poem appear to belong to a different age. They have been exiled to a modernity whose categories they cannot comprehend. Alien and anachronic, they have no choice but to cloak the reality of their *now* in memory images of a distant past. Yet, in the interstices of an impertinent, distorted and distorting consciousness, what are we as readers left to see and believe? Later in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, as the pronoun *we* is repeated to the point of paroxysm, any sense of communion or collective belonging is lost and the chant of the nameless chorus slips into delirium. Image and perception have both broken down.

In HASTAN (1335, *Zemestān*) the poetic image itself enacts the failure of reason when faced with a reality beyond cognitive grasp:[72]

گفت و گو از پاک و نا پاک ست
ما به « هست » آلوده ایم، ای پاک ! و ای نا پاک !

[72] HASTAN is reprinted without alterations in *Az in Avestā* and *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist.* "…goft-o gu az pāk-o nā-pak-ast / v-az kam-o bish-e zolāl-e āb-o ā'ineh…": a threefold affirmation of being and of the world-stainedness of being. • Regarding the motif of purity and impurity in the poem see footnote 23, chapter 3: the penname of Mortezā Keyvān, one of those executed on 27th Mehr 1333, was "Delpāk." HASTAN refers to this execution. It is Akhavān's "Third of May 1808."

پست و نا پاکیم ما هستان
گر همه غمگین، اگر بیغم.
پاک میدانی کیان بودند ؟
آنِ کبوترِ ها که زد در خونشان پر پر
سُربیِ سَردِ سپیده دم.

the talk is of pure and impure
we are stained by « being » oh you who are pure! and who are impure!

we who exist are base and impure
whether sorrowful all, or carefree
do you know who was pure?
those doves in whose blood flickered
the cold lead of dawn.

The image at the end of this penultimate stanza is all the more unsettling as it cannot be resolved into a classical analogy of relations among different ontological planes. Paradoxical entity, the image has become fact or *thereness* and as such resists comprehension. While we know that the poem refers to the execution of political prisoners in the wake of 28 Mordād 1332, the image placed before our eyes appears almost tangible: tangible not as an external phenomenon but as the unmediated reality of a nightmare that cannot be shaken off. In Akhavān's metaphor, the classical dichotomy of form (*qāleb*) and content or meaning (*ma'ni*) ceases to hold and the image can no longer be parsed: isolated, its components simply unravel.[73] Semiotic analysis reveals itself as inoperative as an attempt to reassemble the painter's model from the fragments of a Cubist painting, horribly displaced. In the image of the doves, the passage from a semiotic to a semantic understanding of metaphor, from the plane of the word-sign to that of the sentence renders paraphrase impossible. Form and meaning have coalesced into an indissoluble, porous, worldly whole that is *mimêsis* and *poiêsis* at once.

[73] Nimā in *Harf-hāye Hamsāyeh* says: "gāh-gāhi mesl-e tab-hāye nowbeh be nowbeh be man miguyand: asl ma'ni-st, dar har lebāsi ke bāshad" (Nimā 1351a, 35). Nimā was acutely aware that dualistic conceptions of form and content needed to be overcome.

Puzzlingly, Akhavān in his last collections of poetry – *Dar Hayāt-e Kuchak-e Pā'iz, dar Zendān* (1355), *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist* (1357), *Duzakh, Ammā Sard* (1357) and *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram* (1368) – slips largely back to a classical understanding of metaphor as a microcosmic allegory or simile within the hierarchical structure of a well-ordered universe.[74] Verses like

مشرق چپق طلائی خود را
بر لب گذشت،
روشن کرد.

> the east picked up its golden pipe
> put it to mouth,
> lit it.

from YEK BĀR-E DEGAR… (n.d., *Duzakh, Ammā Sard*) with their straightforward if rather Gargantuan personification would be incongruous in *Zemestān*, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (1338) or *Az in Avestā* (1344). In these books, images unfold their meaning gradually within the echo space of the poem. That said, even in the later poems Akhavān subtly undoes some time-honoured principles, including the classical tendency of metaphors to crystallise along the horizontal axis of the verse (*beyt*).[75] However, it remains undeniable that his poetry after 1345 becomes lexically simpler and loses much of its

[74] Alexandre Koyré in his classic study *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (2) speaks of the "disappearance […] of the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole […] and its replacement by an indefinite and even infinite universe which is bound together by the identity of its fundamental components and laws, and in which all these components are placed on the same level of being." Koyré locates this paradigm shift in 17th century Europe. Classical Persian metaphor rests on a fundamentally neo-Platonic paradigm according to which relations of analogy link the microcosmic and macrocosmic planes.

[75] Shafi'i Kadkani 1378, 169–186. Shafi'i Kadkani argues that in classical courtly poetry, the imaginal unit was constituted by the *beyt.* He attributes the disregard for the organic unity (*vahdat-e ruhi*) of poems to the panegyric function of these works. (However, it remains to be asked if the category of *vahdat-e ruhi* is not in itself somewhat problematic.)

polyphonic structure: the sedimentation of different historical layers glimpsed in verbal peep-holes that give onto different moments of Persian linguistic time.[76]

One of the most striking examples of Akhavān's polyphonic language is MIRĀS (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*):

این دبیر گیج و گول و کور دل : تاریخ،
تا مذهب دفترش را گاهگه میخواست
با پریشان سرگذشتی از نیاکانم بیالاید*
رعشه می افتادش اندر دست.
در بنان درفشانش کلک شیرین سلک می لرزید،
حبرش اندر محبر پر لیقه چون سنگ سیه می بست.

زانکه فریاد امیر عادلی چون رعد بر میخاست :
ـ « هان، کجائی، ای عموی مهربان ! بنویس.
ماه نو را دوش ما، با چاکران، رد نیمه شب دیدیم.
مادیان سرخ یال ما سه کرّت تا سحر زائید.
در کدامین عهد بوده است اینچنین، یا آنچنان، بنویس. »

this dazed and gullible scribe: history,
each time he was poised to stain his gilded chronicle
with the troubled fate of my forebears,
a tremor flashed through his hands.
the mellifluous quill quavered at his eloquent fingertips,
the ink clotted like a black stone on him in the silk-padded ink-well.

for the call of a just ruler had risen like thunder:
– « ho, where are you, kind uncle! write:
yestereve with the servants we beheld the new moon at midnight.
our sorrel mare gave birth three times before dawn.
in what epoch it happened thus or thus, write! »

In a short essay on Akhavān, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1302–1348) refers to *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* as "a collection of 28 poems with a preface that retains traces of an outdated understanding of poetry. A bit of joviality, two or three dainty remarks, and, due to a

[76] Above all, the poets of *sabk-e khorāsāni* have marked Akhavān's language. (On this, see Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 171; also see the helpful overview by Forugh Sahbā entitled "Kohangarā'i-ye Vāzhegāni dar She'r-e Akhavān Sāles.") Akhavān (1376a, 70) writes: "in sabk ruyesh-gāh va mādar va gahvāreh-ye sabk-hāye digar ast va dārā-ye esālat va yekdasti va jazālat-e khāssi-st" (Akhavān 1376a, 70). • The preface to *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist…* (in *Seh Ketāb*, 119–124) is particularly illuminating as it adumbrates the possibility of a new kind of poetry – or, more properly, writing – that moves away from both the classical forms and the framework proposed by Nimā.

lack of courage, a lapse into pleasantry. And this for expressing a serious issue."[77] Āl-e Ahmad's words here betray a staggering blindness for what defines Akhavān. Considering that Āl-e Ahmad was a great champion of Nimā's poetics, his incomprehension is all the more surprising. He approves of only five poems in *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*, among them – for reasons that may be to do with the poem's ostensibly Marxist leanings – MIRĀS. However, even this approval seems to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding. There is no totalising, Hegelian conception of history inscribed on MIRĀS. Rather, the poem enacts a search for what has been lost from memory. It follows the path of what Ricœur calls "une *médiation* ouverte, inachevée, *imparfaite*, a savoir un réseau de perspectives croisées entre l'attente du futur, la réception du passé, le vécu du présent, sans *Aufhebung* dans une totalité où la raison de l'histoire et son effectivité coïncideraient."[78] In MIRĀS, a multitude of perspectives and times is refracted in the consciousness of the speaking, narrating "I." The same prismatic play with history and historical perspectives can be observed in Akhavān's other great narrative poems: NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, MARD-O MARKAB, ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR or NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? These works embody the open, unfinished, imperfect mediation invoked by Ricœur in a polyphonic, heteroglot language that follows a dialogic rather than a dialectical structure.

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[77] He writes: "va ammā *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* majmu'eh-ye 28 she'r ast bā moqaddameh'i ke hanuz asari az mafhum-e kohneh-ye shā'eri rā dar bar dārad. mokhtasar tayyebat, do seh tā khoshmazegi, va be 'ellat-e qellat-e jesārat, be shukhi gorikhtan. ān ham barāye bayān-e matlab-e jeddi" (Āl-e Ahmad in Qāsemzādeh, 91). • Even though the relationship had its troubles and peripeties, Āl-e Ahmad was – together with many other authors and intellectuals of the time – closer to the Tudeh party than Nimā and Akhavān. Esmā'il Kho'i in his intriguing but not unproblematic essay "M. Omid. « Shā'er-e Shekast » ?" argues that Akhavān's early sympathies for communist ideology had in fact waned before the *coup d'état* of 28 Mordād.

[78] Ricœur 1991, 300.

In one of the densest and most thought-provoking chapters of *Sovar-e Khayāl* Shafiʿi Kadkani examines the relationship between poetic imagery and the framework of literary production. He writes:

> [...] شعر پارسی در همه ادوار، بیش و کم مستقیم و غیر مستقیم، شعری در خدمت اشراف و در حوزه فهم و شعور و موازین ادراکی ایشان بوده و شعری که از خصایص زندگی توده مردم بهره کامل برده باشد، و تصویر حیات مردم عادی در آن جریان داشته باشد به نسبت بسیار کم داریم [...] .

> Throughout the ages, Persian poetry was more or less directly or indirectly a poetry in the service of the elite and within the scope of their understanding, while poems that are based on and portray the life circumstances of the common people are extremely rare by comparison.[79]

Shafiʿi Kadkani's central observation is that the courtly milieu and patronage system in which classical poets operated found their expression in the aristocratic tinge of poetic imagery. Significantly, Shafiʿi Kadkani pays less attention to the thematic subject matter of poetry but instead focuses on the way courtly reality was transposed into figures and metaphors: a process which, as it involved the poet's subjectivity, also constituted an ethics.[80] Thus, Manuchehri Dāmghāni's likening of a black storm cloud to the scorched expanse of an arable field wilfully set on fire is not an innocent image: in that it refers to

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[79] Shafiʿi Kadkani 1378, 288. Shafiʿi Kadkani (ibid., 294–296) notes that the case of mystical poetry is different. In fact, mystical poetry addressed an audience outside the elite government circles. Some poets – like for example Sanāʾi – furthermore oscillated between Sufi gatherings and the courtly milieu. • While Shafiʿi Kadkani's analysis is pioneering and astute, it reinforces a certain canon in Persian literary history by relegating non-courtly genres like satire, *shahr-āshub* or the quatrains of Bābā Tāher to the sidelines. This is all the more paradoxical as Shafiʿi Kadkani diagnoses the silencing of popular narratives through courtly literature. Shafiʿi Kadkani's argument rests on an unspoken canon of "high" and "low" literary genres that does not correspond to social structures – elite vs. populace – but nevertheless instates clear criteria of literariness. Nimā bases his theoretical meditations and practical judgements on the same unspoken canon of "high" literature. Only Akhavān in his essays and critical works breaks through the invisible barrier of "high" and "low." It is for this reason that studies like *Naqizeh va Naqizeh-Sāzān* ("Parody and Parodists") are of such great significance. Akhavān engages precisely those writers that Shafiʿi Kadkani omits from his narrative: satirists like Suzani Samarqandi or ʿObeyd Zākāni who in their roguish and worldly texts make a non-courtly environment come alive.

[80] Shafiʿi Kadkani (ibid., 298) writes: "shāʿerān-e darbāri agar ham be ʿanāser-e zendegi-ye mardom ruy āvarand did-e ashrāfi-ye ānhā tasvir-hā rā degargun mikonad."

an act of governmental power the image is at once index of the poem's origin and acknowledgement, perhaps even critique of a violation. Shafiʿi Kadkani argues that poets were striving to ennoble their images in keeping with the social station to which they aspired and therefore gilded, as it were, their metaphors. In other words, the scribe's illuminated chronicle would not accommodate those images that transcended the courtly repertoire of licit resemblances. Other, non-courtly, aboriginal narratives were hushed. While a different kind of poetry naturally existed outside the patronage framework, fewer of these works have come down to us. Many of the poems that did not address an audience of princes, courtiers, secretaries and officials have not survived, except for single lines preserved in contemporary dictionaries and encyclopaedias for their lexical interest. If these scattered references had not come down to us, the images of a life-world outside the courts would be fragmentary and evanescent.[81]

MIRĀS is the poem of a human reality that has fallen out of language: of a discourse in the sense of Ricœur, a discourse "qui veut, dans tous ses usages porter au langage une expérience, une manière d'habiter et d'être-au-monde qui le précède et démande à être dite."[82] We are forever cut off from the being-in-the-world of those who were not counted among the four classes of people:[83] this is what Akhavān's language in MIRĀS most essentially signifies. The poem's diction itself evokes the marvels of a long-dead past whose words, having slipped out of memory, are nothing but obscure sounds to us now. Yet, expressions like *banān-e dor-afshān*, *kelk-e shirin-selk*, *hebr, mehbar* or

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[81] As Shafiʿi Kadkani (ibid., 294) has is, "be khubi mitavān tashkhis dād ke dar hajv-hā ʿanāser-e khayāl az zendegi-ye tudeh-ye mardom gerefteh mishodeh ast."

[82] Ricœur 1986, 34.

[83] People, according to the classification of a courtier from the ʿAbbāsid period, could be divided into four groups: kings, ministers, wealthy noblemen, and those who through culture (*adab*) had achieved closeness to the former three categories (Shafiʿi Kadkani 1378, 290).

liqeh are not technical terms or precious synonyms for objects and qualities that could have been called by a different name. Rather, they are signs that point to an irreplaceable lifeworld.[84] Deployed in the poem, they become emblems of a lost human reality: a reality that is captured in the material universe of the scribe's words.

لیک هیچت غم مباد از این،
ای عموی مهربان، تاریخ !
پوستینی کهنه دارم من که میگوید
از نیاکانم برایم داستان، تاریخ !

but don't be saddened by this,
history, kind uncle!
I have an old fur cloak that tells me
tales of my forebears!

The fur cloak tells of a continuity – an identity through and of time – that speaks no words yet still carries meaning. Ricœur holds that "l'histoire est de bout en bout écriture."[85] If this is true, then history is also the mimetic resurrection or *Vergegenwärtigung* of a past that once existed. Time-(or world-)stained – *ān ruzegār-ālud* – Akhavān's fur cloak is the symbol of a *has-been*, a materiality that testifies to what

[84] In the afterword to *Az in Avestā* (187-189), Akhavān defends his use of obsolete or obsolescent terms. • Akhavān (1376a, 264) says of Nimā: "az loghat va estelāhāt-e mahalli va khāss ham ghāfel namāndeh'ast. nāchār vaghti gusheh-ye tāzeh'i az zendegi bā 'anāser-e tāzeh, be she'r vāred shavad, hamrāh ba khʷod loghat va estelāh-e tāzeh ham miāvarad va in kār agar bā basirat va bi tasanno' surat begirad, be vos'at va tavānā'i-ye zabān miafzāyad." It is precisely this fresh air and sense of a different lifeworld that Nimā's regional words and expressions brought to Persian poetry.

[85] Ricœur 2000, 171.

is no longer there.[86] In the passage from representation to ontology, the possibility of a different history opens up: the story of *another* past, different from the narrative that was codified in the image of courts and rulers.

Objective and subjective realities

Together with "Now'i Vazn dar She'r-e Emruz-e Fārsi" and "Hamāhangi va Tarkib," Akhavān's essay on "Eyniyat va Zehniyat" is among the most perspicacious and important texts on Nima's poetics.[87] However, the concepts of *'eyni* and *zehni* are not unequivocal and call for a closer look at the philosophical premises on which they are based. Hans Wehr's Arabic dictionary renders *surah zehniyah* as "mental image (of a real object)" while Soheil Afnan records the first appearance of *zehni* as a philosophical term in Sohrevardi.[88] If the concept is traced back to Plato and Aristotle, another

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[86] Ricœur (2000, 367) speaks of "la positivité de l'avoir-été visé à travers la négativité du n'être plus." In this context, Akhavān's choice of *ruzegār* over *zamān* is, irrespective of metrical considerations, highly significant: unlike *zamān*, *ruzegār* unites the senses of time and world or existence. In HASTAN, Akhavān expresses a similar idea when he says: "mā be « hast » āludeh'im." • The *pustini kohneh* is evocative of the mantle or cloak (*kherqeh*) passed on by a Sufi *sheykh* to his disciples. (During his trip to Europe in 1369/1990, Akhavān himself, in a typically *rend* gesture, passed on his anorak to Esmā'il Kho'i.) On the textual plane, there is also another continuity: Akhavān plays with the convention of hagiographies that cite chains of holy authority. In MIRĀS, not the chains themselves are disputed but the foundations of holiness. • It is a poignant irony of fate that Akhavān at the end of MIRĀS entrusts the *pustini kohneh* to his daughter Lāleh, who would later (on 26 Shahrivar 1353) die in a tragic accident: "hamchenānash pāk-o dur az raq'eh-ye āludegan midār."

[87] The three essays were collected and, together with other texts, published in *Bed'at-hā va Badāye'-e Nimā Yushij*, whose first edition appeared in 1357. It is interesting to note that "Now'i Vazn dar She'r-e Emruz-e Fārsi" was first published in 1334, the year which marks a turning point in Akhavān's life and writing. It is the first in a series of essays on various aspects of Nimā's poetics.

[88] Afnan, 106. Also see Māri Brijāniān for uses of *'eyni* or *zehni* in translations from Western philosophical works. In all instances Brijāniān cites (among others, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by M. S. Adib Soltāni) the two terms are used to render the concepts "objective" and "subjective" in Persian.

possible translation for *zehni* appears to be "noetic," said of a phenomenon that originates or exists only in the mind or intellect.

یک تعبیر دیگر این معنی - که یاری « دیدن به دریافتن » باشد - همان است که قدمای ما از آن به « عیان » و « خبر » عبارت می آورند و این دو را به مقابله قرار می دادند و از تضاد آنها تلذذ صنعتی بدیعی هم داشتند و مثل این بود و هست که عیان را بی نیاز از بیان دانند.

> Another aspect of the subordination of "seeing to understanding" is that our ancients used to derive rhetorical pleasure from the juxtaposition of *'eyyān* ("evidence") and *khabar* ("hearsay") and apparently considered that *'eyyān* had no need of being expressed in words.[89]

What underlies the opposition of *'eyyān* and *khabar* is a profound distrust – rooted in classical rhetoric – of language as representation. The "subordination of seeing (visual perception) to understanding": in Nimā's poetics, understanding comes to signify the perception not of isolated objects but of relations among things that are grasped by a human consciousness. In letter no. 2 of *Harf-hāye Hamsāyeh*, Nimā states this principle clearly:

دانستن سنگی یک سنگ کافی نیست. مثل دانستن معنی یک شعر است.

> Knowing the stoneness of a stone is not enough. That is like knowing the meaning of a poem.[90]

Just like a stone's essence, a poem's meaning is not a changeless and self-enclosed entity, independent of human consciousness and perception. There is no separate "stoneness" that abrogates the medium of language. For Nimā, the belief in the self-sufficiency of whatever presents itself to the eye rests on an illusion. Poetry is not the intuition of an atemporal idea. Rather, the poetic act captures a specific, unrepeatable moment that is embedded in a swarming network of correspondences, memories and associations.

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[89] Akhavān 1376a, 232.

[90] Nimā 1351a, 7.

The poet applies selective framing (*gozinesh*, *borresh* or *jodā kardan az tabi'at*) to a particular segment of perceived reality – nature – and subsequently redescribes this segment. Meanwhile, as words become absorbed into the poem's metaphorical reality, their relation to their respective referents loses its arbitrariness. In what Akhavān calls Nimā's *shiveh-ye bayān-e 'eyni va tuyeh-dār* ("objective and complex style of expression") the word takes on thingness while conversely, the thing described becomes anchored in a particular word. Language acquires a specific thickness or density that makes it contingent on the circumstances of the enunciation. In his attentive analysis of KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ (1325), one of Nimā's well-known narrative poems, Akhavān notes that the poem circles around the word fear. Calling an abstract term by its name rather than evoking it by poetic means appears to contradict Nimā's imperative that a concrete, embodied image needs to be placed before the eyes of the reader. To dispel this suspicion, Akhavān writes:

البته این بیان کمابیش ذهنی است ما « هول » را فقط می شنویم و به شکل کلمه، آن را نمی بینیم.

> Certainly, this expression is more or less *zehni*, we only hear [the word] "fear" but do not see [fear] in its verbal shape.[91]

Pure hearing means the auditory perception of a random sound-sign that has no ontological connection to its referent. Nevertheless, a metaphorical correlation exists between word and thing: thus, the different words in Persian for "fear" (*howl*, *khowf* or *tars*) conjure up different properties. For instance, Akhavān writes, "howl martub ast, shabnāk va meh-ālud va jangali" ("fear is humid, nightsome, misty and foresty"). He then adds that *tars* is cold while *khowf* is "arid and sepulchral and pertains mostly to hollow-ways and closed spaces."[92] There is a specific, material presence to each of these

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[91] Akhavān 1376a, 258.

[92] It is conceivable that another meaning also resonates in *jangali*, as a nod to the *jonbesh-e jangal* around the time of the Constitutional Revolution.

words, which means that no other aspect of fear could have replaced *howl* in KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ.

In the course of his argument Akhavān approximates the concept of *khabar* to the realm of *zehniyat*, because what is heard – an airborne message – refers and correlates to a mental image. It therefore makes sense in this particular context to translate *khabar* as linguistic representation. Yet, it would be misleading to believe that Akhavān opposes seeing as the sensory perception of visual phenomena to hearing as the perception of sounds. Rather, he suggests that the traditional dichotomy of *'eyyān* and *khabar* points to a belief in the possibility of unmediated perception. In other words, the treatises of classical poetics regard seeing or eye-witnessing as the vision of an essence that bypasses the materiality and thus fallibility of a medium, linguistic or otherwise. Language, however, is always already representation and thus, ultimately, the placeholder of an absence.

> نیما یوشیج، بنا به صراحتهایی که در نظرات خود دارد، و به دلیل بسیاری از آثارش بی صراحت، در شیوه بیان متعقد به جست و جو و ارائه تصاویر و جلوه های « عینی » و « مشهود » است.
>
> Nimā Yushij, according to his unambiguous views and his many ambiguous works seeks to present images that are *'eyni* and *mashhud* in their expression.[93]

Significant here is the conjunction of *'eyni* – whose semantic range covers ocular, real, corporeal, material and objective – and *mashhud*, which is attributed to something that takes place in the presence of spectators or witnesses: a scene that unfolds and, as it unfolds, becomes observable. In other words, both terms refer to the appearance of a thing that does not repose in itself but is given to the eye. The pervasive Platonism in classical rhetoric used to contrast the merely intelligible with the sensible. It is this dichotomy that Nimā and Akhavān seek to overcome. In their writing, the mistrust in language as representation makes place for a belief in the ability of poetic language to

[93] Akhavān 1376a, 233.

redescribe reality through the image. Ricœur sums up admirably what is at stake in the definition of the poetic utterance and its power, perhaps even mission to be more than the quiescent correlate of a mental image. He writes: "la métaphore est le processus rhétorique par lequel le discours libère le pouvoir que certaines fictions comportent de redécrire la réalité. […] la *poiêsis* du langage procède de la connexion entre *muthos* et *mimêsis*."[94] In the alliance of *muthos* and *mimêsis*, active and descriptive aspects of poetic discourse are joined and become thinkable together.

Akhavān believes that for Nimā, the artist's task is to "find these concrete (*'eyyāni*) images and material appearances which form the link between the poet's reasoning (*ta'ammol*) and imagination (*khayālāt*) and the listener's receptiveness and acceptance."[95] Metaphor – the image – here is the bridge that allows the relation of poet and reader or listener (Persian poetry, though it may be codified in writing, is still regarded as a fundamentally auditory art) to be realised: it is the switchpoint of two subjectivities. In a key passage that warrants being quoted in full, Akhavān sets forth the stakes of *poiêsis* as an intersubjective process:

> کلمه ها، حتی در حالی که زنده و رایج باشند، به خودی خود برای آفرینشهای شعری کم توانند و در حد رسایی تازه فقط اشاره هایی هستند، با قوتهایی متفاوت، برای دلالت به آنچه در حیز هستی است، از چیز ها و معنی ها و حالات. شاعر به مدد بسی حیله ها و فوت و فنهای دیگر، مثل حالت نغمگی و روانگی وزن و یاد آوری و زنجیره بندی قوافی و چه بسیار دوز و کلکهای دیگر، کلمه ها را که یک واسطه و رابط عمومی هستند، تبدیل به یک واسطه خصوصی می کند برای دلالت به دنیای خصوصی تری که در درون دارد. اگرچه کوشش و استعداد شنونده هم در این رسیدن و راه یافتن به جای خود مهم است، اما کشش شاعر از آن هم مهم تر است. کشش او بیشتر در همین « جان دیگر » دادن به کلمه هاست به خاطر نشان دادن راههایی که به دنیای آفریده ذهن او می رسد.
>
> Even if they are alive and current, words in themselves are ineffective for poetic creations and nothing but indices, more or less powerful in terms of eloquence,

[94] Ricœur 1975, 11. Mimesis is generally rendered in Arabic and Persian treatises as *mohākāt* or *taqlid* ("imitation"). Akhavān uses the two terms interchangeably when discussing Nimā's critique of poetry as a passive echo or imitation.

[95] Akhavān (1376a, 234) writes: "Nimā […] kār-e honarmand rā peydā kardan-e hamin tasāvir-e 'eyyāni va jelveh-hāye māddi-ye rābet beyn-e ta'ammol va khayālat-e guyandeh va ta'sir va paziresh-e shenavandeh midānad."

> for referring to existent things, significations and states of the mind. With the help of numerous tricks and techniques […] the poet transforms words and turns them from a general medium and link into a particular link for referring to the even more particular world that he carries in himself. And even though the listener's effort and disposition have their own significance here, the poet's exertion is more important. His exertion consists in giving « another life » to words, so as to show pathways to the world that his mind has created.[96]

Four major propositions are advanced here: the power of words remains latent so long as they are ensconced in current discourse and have not been subtly displaced within the frame of a new image; "things, significations and states of the mind" are regarded as equally rooted in temporal existence; words exist doubly, as part of the totality of language and within the discourse of a particular speaker; *poiêsis* is defined as "giving another life to words." In his remarks, Akhavān moves away from Platonic ideas of *mimêsis* and approaches Ricœur, who seeks to trace the original sense and force of the concept in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Akhavān also short-circuits the conceptual rift that disjoins the consciousness of the writer from that of reader and exiles the progeny of the imagination from the physical world. In Nimā's and Akhavān's poetics, being part of existence necessarily means being material and possessed of a body.

Nimā considers that the poetic imagination gives substance to meaning:

> اگر شاعر نتواند یک مطلب عادی و به گوش همه رسیده را قوی تر از آن اندازه قوت که هست نشان بدهد، اگر شاعر نتواند معنی را جسم بدهد و خیالی را پیش چشم بگذارد، با داستانهای خود ثابت بدارد یا باطل کند ؛ کاری نکرده است. شاعر نیست […] .

> If the poet is unable to render an ordinary and familiar subject more powerful than it is, if the poet is unable to give body to a meaning and place a *khayāl* before the eyes, to substantiate or revoke his stories, he has achieved nothing. He is not a poet […] .[97]

Yet, if this is *mimêsis*, then what does it represent and who is the agent of representation? Shafi'i Kadkani defines *khayāl* as *tajrobeh-ye hessi* ("sensory

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[96] Akhavān 1376a, 235.

[97] Nimā 1351a, 124.

experience"),[98] which is odd, given that *khayāl* in current usage denotes a phantasm, figment or ghost: an unreality or not-yet-reality that is also the projection of a scheme into the future. Being fundamentally an experience of the imagination, *khayāl* lies outside the conceptual mechanism that makes the *surat-e zehni* a more or less faithful but ultimately insubstantial representation of an exterior, objective and objectively perceptible reality. Instead, *khayāl* in Nimā's analysis reverses the mimetic process by departing from the faculty of the imagination to graft a poetic vision on reality. In other words, *khayāl* enables the poet to redescribe what he sees metaphorically. It underlies all *poiêsis*, which is the power of language to create rather than produce a verisimilitude. Expressed in its most concise from, the imperative at the centre of Nimā's poetics is, "be jā-ye sharh va towsif-e zabāni, tasvir" ("instead of verbal commentary and explication, image").[99] For Nimā, the image emerges from and is shot through with language, indissociably: the simple retelling – paraphrase – of a reality, inspired by the belief that meaning can be redeemed from its linguistic form, is no longer thinkable.[100]

In ANDUHNĀK-E SHAB (1319), a poem which – like DĀSTĀNI NA TĀZEH – may be considered a programmatic exposition of Nimā's poetics, the following lines stand out:

چون ماه خنده می زند از دور روی موج
در خُرده های خنده ی او یافته ست اوج.

as the moon smiles on the wave from afar
it has peaked in the fragments of its smile.

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[98] Shafi'i Kadkani 1378, 17.

[99] Akhavān 1376a, 242. Following W. K. Wimsatt's conception of the poem as verbal icon, *tasvir* could meaningfully be rendered as "icon" here.

[100] Nimā's imperative should not be mistaken for an attack on classical Persian poetry. Poets have always and will always create in language by placing a *khayāl* before the eyes. Instead, Nimā offers a corrective to certain ingrained ways of Persian literary criticism at the time, where poems were happily paraphrased and thought happened along dichotomies of form vs. content and truth vs. representation.

The crescent moon's prismatic reflection occurs at the point where the wave peaks to dissolve into sea foam. Both insubstantial perception and temporal reality, Nimā's image is also a figure of metaphor itself: a coincidence of opposites. In the metaphoric coupling, the distant immateriality of moonlight is transsubstantiated and for a fleeting instant becomes the white spray that announces the wave's expiration.[101] On the syntactic level, the field of tension created by the transient conjunction of two incongruous entities is echoed in the double determination – the suspended reference – of "yāfteh'ast owj": both the moon and the wave's crest could be regarded as the grammatical subject that finds its peak. Yet, grammatical relations here are as evanescent as the climax of wave and moon. What happens in Nimā's metaphor unfolds in a movement that cannot be sustained yet nevertheless creates a poetic reality.

It is no coincidence that ANDUHNĀK-E SHAB has a greater concentration of nominalised adjectives than any other of Nimā's poems.[102] Even though precedents for this usage may be found in classical poetry, as Akhavān is anxious to show in *'Atā va Leqā-ye Nimā Yushij*, expressions like

تنها بجاست بر سر سنگی،
بر جای او،
اندوهناکِ شب.

alone there on a rock,
in its place,
is the gloom-stricken night.

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[101] Akhavān (1376a, 250) asks: "bā kodām serāhati betavānad behtar az in suratgari-ye sādeh maqsud va ma'ni-yash rā dar mā holul dehad?" What is conceptualised here is a transmigration of meaning: a shared substance.

[102] Akhavān (1376b, 123) notes that contrary to allegations voiced by his critics, "Nimā in shiveh-ye badi'-e bayāni rā ke az lotf va zibā'i-ye khāss barkhordār ast, dar haqiqat ehyā kardeh'ast, na ebdā'." Akhavān numbers the nominalisation of adjectives among the characteristic features (*leqā*) of Nimā's poetry and cites a classical precedent for each instance. Akhavān himself makes use of nominalised adjectives and essences in his poems, if to a lesser extent than Nimā (see footnote 34, chapter 3).

or

پایان این شب
چیزی بغیرِ روشنِ روزِ سفید نیست

the end of this night
is but the luminousness of a clear day

are unsettling and take on significance through their intentional dislocation of grammatical categories. In a reversal of the accepted order of attribution, night and day are attached to "sorrowful" and "luminous." Qualities which conventionally relate to a distinct, autonomous essence and are not viable in isolation acquire an existence of their own and become substances, real and intrinsic to themselves.

In the lines

هر سایه ای رمیده به کنجی خزیده است،
سوی شتابهای گریزندگان موج.

all shadows have fled, crept to a corner,
towards the rushes of wave-fugitives.

a strange play of materiality and immateriality – transience – is enacted. Whose shadows are disembodied, nocturnal? Read as a depiction of an objective reality the poem does not make sense. In other words, the sense of an external coherence in fact points elsewhere, to another, non-representational meaning. Nature in ANDUHNĀK-E SHAB is cast as a realm of shadows yet the allegorical mechanism of Plato's cave has come oddly unhinged. There is no other, transcendent space of reality beyond the dark reflections that glide over the water's surface. Rather, these reflections exist in and for themselves, immaterial bodies without source or origin. As the sea is submerged beneath its waves ("dar mowj-e khʷod foru rafteh"), the shadows – word shadows – become witness to an endless unfolding. Only the night endures, immutable and still.

Nimā believes that poetry is not unrelated or alien to the substance of life ("māddeh'i bi ertebāti bā māddeh-ye zendegi nist") but rather co-substantial with being itself.[103] There is no ontological hierarchy, not even a difference in kind: the text is not yoked to reality in imitation. This is also why Nimā never speaks of reality in opposition to the text. The poem's Other or double for him is life, owned and anchored in human consciousness.

Letter no. 63, one of the most densely written and important texts of *Harf-hāye Hamsāyeh*, touches upon the conditions for a poetic fiction to redescribe reality:

> همچنین کلمه ی (درختی) بدون اسم از آن درخت، که قوت رئالیست به آن می بخشد، طرز کارهای کلاسیک را بیاد می اندازد که بچیز ها رنگ وضوح نمی دهند.
>
> Likewise the word "tree" if that tree is not named and thus given a realistic force, recalls the classical method, which does not impart the colour of evidence to things.[104]

It is in language that a sense of reality can be conveyed: a sense, ultimately, that the scene described in the poem has indeed been witnessed rather than imagined. For this reason, names of birds, trees and geographical features, colours and shadings of light abound in Nimā's poems and root them in a particular moment and place. However, there is also the puzzling presence of numerous non-Persian expressions, framed by quotation marks, discrete and strange. For Nimā's implied audience of educated urban readers the regional terms that are scattered through his poems are nothing but meaningless sounds: *ri rā*, *kāch* or *talājan* are lexical blanks, islets embedded in a highly sophisticated literary language.[105] Yet, while the precise meaning of these words may be obscure – Nimā deliberately, it would seem, provides no footnotes or explanations – the *rang-e vozuh* ("colour of evidence" or "clear sense," perhaps even *effet du réel*) is

[103] Nimā 1351a, 137.

[104] ibid., 142.

[105] Qezvānchāchi in his glossary lists 116 Māzandarāni expressions.

nevertheless imparted: we know that the thing or entity whose name we do not understand exists, elsewhere, in a life-space distinct from ours. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his lucidly beautiful study *La poésie comme expérience* writes about the conflicting forces at the origin of the poem. He describes the vertigo of an event – the poetic utterance – detaching itself both from the indistinct continuum of a background and the incommunicable uniqueness of an inner experience:

> cet inavènement étant ce qui arrache l'événement à sa singularité et fait qu'au comble de la singularité, la singularité elle-même s'anéantit et le dire survient – le poème et possible.[106]

As words whose referent remains obscure, the particles of an alien lifeworld in Nimā's works become a real and vital force within the textual space of the poem, marking the singular fact of its existence.

The two mirrors

Nimā's poetry does not describe nature without man and neither does Akhavān's. However, not the single, isolated human being moves through their poems as a figure that animates a natural setting. Instead, man appears as an "I": a human subjectivity that becomes tangible in a mode of perception. Implied, fleeting presence, the "I" recedes from the text and, in the same movement, the illusion of a self-identical subject fades out of view. In some of Akhavān's lyric works – CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH (1335), KHAZĀNI (1335), NĀZHU (1335) or PEYGHĀM (1336, all *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) – the human being is a marginal presence, barely marked grammatically, impermanent and insubstantial yet nevertheless real as a sentient medium – an organ – of suffering. In NĀZHU the speaking, questioning "I" is thrown back and addressed, defiantly turned into a "you" by the

[106] Lacoue-Labarthe 2004, 35.

poem's eponymous evergreen pine while in PEYGHĀM a strange perspectival play shows the "I" from outside, as it were, frozen in an eternalised moment that leaves no traction for a personal subject. At the end of these poems, the perceiving mind has been absorbed into the images evoked by the text and lingers on in their memory.

One of Akhavān's early masterpieces, ANDUH (1333, *Zemestān*), erects a nocturnal space from which all humanity, even that of a singular human consciousness has been expunged:

در شب دیوانه غمگین
مانده دشت بیکران زیر باران، آه ساعتهاست
همچنان میبارد این ابر سیاه ساکت دلگیر ؛
نه صدای پای اسب رهزنی تنها،
نه صفیر بادِ ولگردی،
نه چراغِ چشَم گرگی پیر.

in the frenzied disconsolate night
the boundless steppe has for hours held out in the rain
and still this gloomy black cloud keeps pouring down;
no hoof beat of a lone highwayman's horse,
no whistle of a stray gust of wind,
no glimmer of an old wolf's eyes.

The poem itself has the form of a diptych. Its two stanzas are separated by an asterisk and framed by the double repetition of an absence: not even the faint luminosity of a gaze redeems the nocturnal solitude. In the final lines, there are no verbs that could anchor perception in time and place, as if consciousness itself were no longer detached from the surrounding night. The poet's "I" has been eclipsed by darkness and dissolved in what is described. Meanwhile, a mirror movement takes place in the reader, who is drawn into the space of the poem without any certainties of identity and difference to hold on to. In his essay on KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ, Akhavān quotes Nimā as saying that the poet "has to pull the reader out of him- or herself with the first line" ("lāzem ast khʷānandeh rā bā avvalin mesra' az khʷod birun bekeshad").[107] A striking remark and, significantly,

[107] Nimā quoted in Akhavān 1376a, 257.

a double imperative: Nimā not only interpellates the poet but also calls on the reader to be receptive to the outside – the Other – that is the text. Being pulled out of oneself means perceiving the scene of the poem as if for the first time, in its imaginary singularity. Lacoue-Labarthe writes that poetry is "l'interruption de l'art, c'est-à-dire l'interruption de la mimésis. L'acte poétique consiste à percevoir, non à représenter. Représenter, selon au moins certaines des « anciennes rumeurs », cela ne peut se dire que du déjà-présent. Ce qui est « en train d'apparaître » ne se représente pas."[108] Never finite, the poetic image captures the moment of a becoming that presents itself to poet and reader alike. Pivot of two subjectivities, the image dislocates us from ourselves by interrupting our grooves of perception. ANDUH is the emblem of this process: a space of passage that gives shelter to myriad different consciousnesses without letting any of them ever take root.

In Nimā's KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ (1325) a startling transgression occurs:

طبل می کوبد و در شاخ دمان
به سوی راه دگر می گذرد.
مرده در گور گرفته است تکان، پنداری
جسته یا زنده ای از زندگی خود، که شما ساخته اید[، ...]

he beats his drum and, blowing his horn,
sets out in another direction.
as if a dead man had stirred in his grave
or a living man broken away from his life – which you have built[, …]

The sudden address of a "you," unparalleled in Nimā's poetry, shatters the illusion of the poem as something that unfolds in a separate, untouchable space beyond our reality. By breaking through the fourth wall, Nimā both revokes the fictional character of poetic speech and compels the reader to take up a position towards the text. Ricœur says about the hermeneutic act of reading:

[108] Lacoue-Labarthe 2004, 99.

> Se comprendre, c'est se comprendre *devant le texte* et recevoir de lui les conditions d'un soi autre que le moi qui vient à la lecture. Aucune des deux subjectivités, ni celle de l'auteur, ni celle du lecteur, n'est donc première au sens d'une présence originaire de soi à soi-même.[109]

The irruption of a "you" in KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ is the apostrophe of a reader as the poem's Other. It is the avowal of a shared guilt and an appeal for solidarity: we too are responsible for the wretched destitution that blights the life of the old night-watchman. At the same time, Nimā's "you" is the call for a Ricœurean hermeneutics and thus for a way of reading that lets the "I" approach the poem to become self. No longer thought as a surface or impassive screen that is parsed by a neutral observer, the text becomes the unstable interface of two consciousnesses: an ever-renewed call of echoes or mirror images reflecting back on each other. It is no coincidence that Akhavān chose to write on KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ rather than AFSĀNEH (1301) or PĀDSHAH-E FATH (1326), Nimā's other, perhaps more famous narrative works. Fissured by an outside that both transcends and encloses the fictional order, the broken epics of *Az in Avestā* – ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR (1339), MARD-O MARKAB (1341) or NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? (1343) – belong in the lineage of KĀR-E SHAB-PĀ. They too tell of a porous text and a responsibility that extends beyond the space of the poem: cognisant of their existence as figment they, paradoxically, for the blink of an eye become real.

[109] Ricœur 1986, 31.

CHAPTER 3
TIME-SPACES OF POETIC NARRATION

Time with all its various inflections is the central theme of Akhavān's poetry. In the nine evanescent lines of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH (1335) time is figured as a structure of the mind while in poems like BĀGH-E MAN (1335) or KHAZĀNI (1335) time is made visible as the absence of that which once was: a garden deserted by winter and the remembrance of spring. Other poems bring time to a halt and diffuse any sense of linear progression. Still others speak of an ekstasis, of a consciousness that has ceased to belong. Over the following pages our concern will be to see how a phenomenology of time can guide us through Akhavān's poetic universe. Above all, we shall attempt to understand how time is voiced and enacted poetically. Language is a vehicle for categories of thought and narrative but also acts as a medium of resistance against extinction and the erosion of memory. As Paul Ricœur, whose philosophical hermeneutics will be the lodestar orienting our discussion, writes in the preface to *Temps et récit*: "Il est remarquable que ce soit l'usage du langage qui soutienne, par provision, la résistance à la thèse du non-être."[1] There can be no more poignant sense to BĀGH-E MAN, the poem that closes *Zemestān* with the memory of an impossible future: an abundant destitution. In the image of *bāgh-e bi-bargi* time – and absence – enter language. Just as the paradox itself cannot be eliminated so too the garden, clothed in a contradiction beyond rational

[1] Ricœur 1983, 25. The image of *bāgh-e bi-bargi* is a metaphor in Ricœur's sense, extended in time to the enunciation rather than being sealed off in the atemporal unit of the word.

grasp, will not surrender to extinction. Indelibly marked on language, the coincidence of opposites endures as a precarious but real union of antinomical orders.

Akhavān's poetry is full of transitions, of spaces bleeding into each other, reversed, tipped over by the passing of time. What happens, happens at the cusp, is captured in the very moment of becoming something else.[2] The precarious equilibrium of time and existence is given image and volume, is made tangible, inhabitable even, in twilight spaces of dusk and dawn (BĀZGASHT-E ZĀGHĀN, TOLU', SABUHI), oneiric spaces of memory, dream and myth (ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH?), itinerant spaces (CHĀVUSHI, BARF, MARD-O MARKAB) or time-spaces through which the "I" moves and which, in turn, begin to structure subjective perception. The lyric poem too is a time-space: it is scene to the changes that affect what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls "das stehende und widerstehende Selbst, das « Ich » bin und worin die Zeit ist."[3] Outside his classical works, Akhavān moves away from the lyric poem as an expression of love for a human Other and recasts the *ghazal* as a poem of absence, an elegy for what is no longer there: the lost spring of BĀGH-E MAN (1335), KHAZĀNI (1335), NĀZHU (1335), PEYGHĀM (1336) and MARSIYEH (1337), the void of human companionship in ANDUH (1333), the departed lover in GHAZAL 3 (1336) or the suspension of time itself in MORDĀB (1334). An irretrievable, distanced moment both constitutes these poems and is mourned in them. Yet, aspects of time animate all of Akhavān's poetry, whether lyric or narrative: time in language as the play with different historical layers, spatialised and immobilised time, the anti-time of desire and, finally, the dissociative time of the dream. In Akhavān's narrative poems, above all, history –

[2] "C'est au moment où ils passent (*praeteruntia*) que nous mesurons les temps, quand nous les mesurons en les percevant" (Augustine quoted in Ricœur 1983, 28).

[3] Gadamer 1973, 49. We shall briefly return to Gadamer when exploring "La parole scindée" in the next chapter.

historical time – becomes indissociable from the weave of language itself. On the sidelines of any transcendence, the polyphony of voices here is the foundation of an ethics: MIRĀS (1335), ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH (1336, both *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR or NĀGĀH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH (1343, both *Az in Avestā*) are spaces of resonance for a multiplicity of voices while shunning reduction to a single point of view, a single imperative. Akhavān's broken epics offer no assurance of a categorical worldview but rather testify to an age whose centre no longer holds.

My analyses in the present chapter and the next will focus on Akhavān's three canonic cycles of poetry: *Zemestān* (1335), *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (1338) and *Az in Avestā* (1344). Only few and scattered references will be made to other works. The main justification for this choice is the scope of our examination: *Arghanun* (1330) and the later poetry collections, to be precise, *Dar Hayāt-e Kuchak-e Pā'iz dar Zendān* (1355), *Duzakh, Ammā Sard* (1357), *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist…* (1357), *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram* (1368), and *Manzumeh-ye Boland- Savāheli va Khuziyāt* could not have been contained within the limits of a single dissertation.[4] Considering earlier and later poems, to say nothing of the prose texts (*Derakht-e Pir-o Jangal* and *Mard-e Jenn-Zadeh*), would also have blurred our focus, as different questions would then have come to the fore: specifically, questions of ethics and the relationship

[4] I am well aware that my choice runs the danger of reinforcing a certain *doxa* with respect to Akhavān's œuvre, namely that his zenith as a poet between the years 1334 and 1344 was followed by a period of decline and resignation, lined with études in the classical style – as Ebrahim Golestān (1369, 768) puts it: "she'r mishod yek zur-āzmā'i bā gozashtegān-e tasanno'." On this matter, see a poignant episode recounted by Mortezā Kākhi in the preface to *Harim-e Sāyeh-hāye Sabz*, I, 12–13. Also see Mohammadi Āmoli 1380, 15, 193–194, 208, and, specifically, 225–227, who renders a widely held view that has been most pointedly expressed by Esmā'il Kho'i (in Kākhi 1378, 225). One of the few intellectuals to have voiced a more balanced appraisal is Simin Behbahāni in her 1369 obituary "Akhavān joz az Ranj-e Digarān Nanālid" (in Qāsemzādeh, 199–215) and in an interview from the same year. A thorough and dispassionate reading of Akhavān's non-canonical works, including the classical poems and unpublished writings, remains an important project to be addressed in the future.

between writing and life. In the pages of this chapter, however, our principal endeavour shall be to elucidate the inner workings of a poetry that has come to itself.

The chapter is divided into six sections, thematic in the widest sense, given to close readings of poems under the aspect of time. In the course of our explorations we shall touch upon matters of language, loss and desire, myth and reality, night, absence and, ultimately, death as the only presence that keeps haunting Akhavān's work. Initially, we shall try to understand how Akhavān's poetry disavows metaphor and lets the rawness of real, human time irrupt into the space of the poem. Questions of experience carried over into the text to become remembrance will concern us throughout the chapter as will the temporal, perhaps even blasphemous mysticism of a profoundly political prayer: HASTAN (1335). From there, we propose to look at how parallel time-spaces of a dreaming consciousness are constructed in some of Akhavān's most emblematic poems, CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH (1335) and ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR (1339). Again, time here is no neutral medium but a substance that allows the poet to show dissociations of mind and body. An important part of the chapter will then be devoted to desire as the intractable, silent counter-current that subtends all of Akhavān's poetry. Desire takes on many guises yet invariably reaches out for a time other than the present: it lives on the *no-longer-there* of KHAZÂNÎ (1335), NÂZHÛ (1335) or PEYGHÂM (1336) and the *not-yet-there* of PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH (1341). In between these two unattainable spaces, the *now* of the present is hollowed out and the mind immobilised in a moment without end, a state of limbo that corresponds to the stupor gripping Iran after the 1953 *coup d'état* against Mohammad Mosaddeq. Towards the end of the chapter, we shall explore the mechanisms by which time in Akhavān is turned into space while the night becomes an autonomous force that no longer leads to the enlightenment of an allegorical day. Indebted to the thought of Michel de Certeau on

cheminement as an ethical practice, our concluding meditations then attempt to trace the itinerant spaces of Akhavān's poetry, temporal spaces that defy totalisation as they come into being with the wayfarer's steps. CHĀVUSHI (1335), QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN (1339) or MARD-O MARKAB (1341) are poems that map out an ethics precisely because they decline the comfort of signposted certainties. The "I" moving through space is a contingent creature fraying a path that emerges with each new step taken, from moment to fleeting moment. In the course of my readings, the central questions of the next chapter will thus already be foreshadowed: the nature of the "I" that speaks in Akhavān's lyric poems and the depth of time – as a possibility of history – that is uncovered in the many-voiced texture of his narrative poems.

The most intimate relation

NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? (1343) closes *Az in Avestā* and must be considered one of Akhavān's masterpieces.[5] Extending over ten printed pages, it is also one of his longest poems – exceeded in length only by QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN (1339) and MARD-O MARKAB (1341). Over the course of 17 stanzas (divided by asterisks into three wings, as in a triptych), the phenomena projected into the poem's space change in meaning and weight, like semi-transparent layers of an unknown fabric assuming a different hue each time a new layer is added. Within the poem's tectonics, semantic

[5] In one of his most wide-ranging interviews Akhavān addresses the question of political poetry and "deciphers" some of the "symbolism" (*ramz*) that has been read into NĀGAH…? He refers in particular to the fawn dog and to the young man who suffers a "fake" epilectic fit. While the political realities of the time have doubtlessly found their way into Akhavān's poems as (semi-)allegorical encryptions, a simple "translation" from literal to allegorical plane – even if such a thing were possible – would fall short of capturing the *specific* ways in which his poetry speaks and thus creates meaning: "she'r faghat yek manzumeh ke qesseh yā qesseh-hā, dāstān yā dāstānak-hā'i rā faghat revāyat konad nist" (Akhavān in Kākhi 1382, 334–337).

plates become imbricated and figures reframed: a *Wechsel der Töne* takes place.[6] Thus, the fawn dog in stanza eight makes its first appearance as part of a "realistic" scene. Realism, however, soon fades into allegory: an allegory of servant and master, dependency and corruptibility even, which then tips over, unexpectedly and in a daring sleight-of-hand, into the most classical simile, before the spectacle ends on a bitterly ironic note, as if the abomination witnessed had been but a mirage of words.

In one of his seminal texts on Akhavān, Mohammad Rezā Shafi'i Kadkani speaks of the poet's "materialistic mysticism."[7] Such a label is, in a way, both accurate and too vague. Certainly, Akhavān's work is tautened – oscillates – between the highest and lowest orders of existence: "in besān-e shabn-nam-e kh^{w}orshid, / v-ān besān-e lisaki lulandeh dar khāk-ast" (HASTAN). Some poems in *Zemestān*, such as BE MAHTĀBI KE BAR GURESTĀN MITĀBAD (1331), speak with a rawness that is at the same time disturbingly *modern* and oddly unliterary, as if the "I" of the poem were refusing to be anything but a

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[6] See Lawrence John Ryan, *Hölderlins Lehre vom Wechsel der Töne*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960, and Peter Szondi's brilliantly clear analysis (Szondi 1970, 119–179). Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 238) speaks of what can perhaps be translated as Akhavān's "chromatically undulating rhetoric": "dar in she'r [ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR] Akhavān yek returik-e sayyāl āfarideh ast ke be tanāsob-e har lahzeh-ye she'r, 'avaz mishavad va surati tāzeh be kh^{w}od migirad." (We shall return to the matter of tonal transmutations in the following chapter.) • QASIDEH (1337, *Zemestān*) is another poem where the *Wechsel der Töne* is consummately brought into play.

[7] "dar ānjā tasavvof be vojud āmad bā hameh-ye rang-hāye shirin va talkhash; va injā « u » goriz-gāhi mi-juyad mānand-e tasavvof ammā na chun tasavvof. ān goriz-gāh bar asās-e ma'naviyati metāfiziki bud-o in yek goriz-gāh-e māddi-ye mahz-ast. Yek no' tasavvof-e māddi … hameh chiz rā be maskhareh gereftan" (Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 143). However, I believe that poems such as NAMĀZ and HASTAN owe their essential being to a (counter-)tradition of *apophasis* – a mode of writing that, after World War II, seemed the only path left for answering to a *different* unspeakability. (See, among others, Shira Wolosky's *Language Mysticism. The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett and Celan.*) As for any mockery resonating in the poem's play on language, such echos are but a smokescreen masking the same existential despair as so many of Akhavān's broken voices (the two doves speaking in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, the deluded lyre in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, etc.).

witness, deeply involved.[8] Later, from the second half of *Zemestān* to *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* and, ultimately, *Az in Avestā*, the rawness of the earlier poems is transmuted. There is no longer any conflict between content and form: the need to disavow metaphor in the face of its referent has given way to a mature poetics. However, no metaphysical consolation can be found in Akhavān's images: any *beyond* is but a trope. Even the ecstasy of a poem like SABZ (1339, *Az in Avestā*) is worldly, not transcendental, with the abject degradation of ZENDEGI (1343, *Az in Avestā*) ever close by, as an ineluctable other. On a different plane, the unresolved tension between vile and pure is mirrored in a movement between what is closest and farthest away: between the heartchamber and the unbounded steppe of CHĀVUSHI (1335, *Zemestān*). What name could be made to embrace the *coincidentia oppositorum* that is Akhavān's poetry?

A mysticism of the most intimate relation is embodied in the crystalline space of NAMĀZ (1339, *Az in Avestā*). The poem's "I" speaks of events in an undefined past (when? not a single adverb sets the distance between experience and recollection). It seems as if the past invoked by "bāgh bud-o dareh – chashmandāz-e por mahtāb" was subtly *other*, made from a different fabric than the *erstwhile* of KHAZĀNI, NĀZHU, PEYGHĀM or PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH.[9] But why? In the first eight lines of the poem, only two finite verbs anchor

[8] The poem did not appear in the first edition of *Zemestān* (1335) but was included by Akhavān when the book saw its first reprint in 1346.

[9] In all these poems, the verbs are given in the simple past yet differ in their *aspect*, i.e., the relation marked by these verbal actions to the moment of speaking: *perfective* vs. *immediate*. • Analysing the nature of time in Celan's poem GROSSE, GLÜHENDE WÖLBUNG Jacques Derrida writes: "Enfin, qu'on les analyse dans le temps de leur énoncé ou dans le temps de leur énonciation, *tous les présents grammaticaux renvoient non seulement à des présents différents mais chaque fois, pour chacun d'eux, à des temporalités radicalement hétérogènes*, à des calendriers ou à des horaires chronologiques incommensurable qui restent l'un pour l'autre irréductiblement anachroniques. Et donc intraduisibles. Disproportionnés. Intraduisibles l'un dans l'autre, sans analogies" (Derrida 2003, 51; italics added). Perhaps we could say that likewise, each grammatical past in Akhavān's poems refers to a radically heterogeneous temporality.

what is described in relation to our *now*. We know – or think we know – that there was a garden and a parenthetical "I," ecstatic, drunk. Yet past and present begin to blur and become strangely elusive: the sequence of elliptical, verbless phrases creates a sense of time held in abeyance as voices and sounds – Persian does not distinguish – are folded into a state of wonder. Then, the "I" remembers, speaks of rising and ablutions and of a tiny leaf picked from a walnut tree. Still, no past, however imaginary, is chronicled in NAMĀZ. Rather, the poem tells the memory of a moment whose extension in time is as measureless as ecstatic experience itself. There can be no certainty that anything ever took place at all and NAMĀZ is not merely the figment of an intoxicated mind. But the question of truth has no purchase, for the poem is, ultimately, "la métaphore instable d'un inaccessible."[10] As such, it marks a passage: between the irretrievable moment and its commemoration something has changed. Temporalised in the voice, the consciousness of NAMĀZ resurges from the past yet at the same time, most profoundly belongs to the present. It is a *posthumous* consciousness for whom the past has been lost into the act of remembrance.

The entry into temporality as the ground of human existence is already prefigured in the poem's beginning:

با غ بود و دره - چشم انداز پر مهتاب.
ذاتها با سایه های خود هم اندازه.

there was a garden and valley – a moonlit sight.
essences were on a par with their shadows.

As it gauges the shadow's dimension, time is inscribed in the relation of substance and attribute and thus ceases to be a transcendent principle. Rather, it becomes a function of this most intimate relation that is the shadow's accordance with its first source.

[10] de Certeau 1987, 105.

NAMĀZ is a complex weave of classical and modern images, a synthesis of two epistemological orders reflected on the translucent surface of the poem. When Akhavān says,

نه صدائی جز صدای راز های شب،
و آب و نرمای نسیم و جیرجیرکها،
پاسداران حریم خفتگان با غ،
و صدای حیرت بیدار من (من مست بودم، مست)

no sound but the sound of the night's secrets,
of water, the tender breeze and cicadas
guarding the sanctuary of those asleep in the garden
and the sound of my waking awe (drunk was I, drunk)[11]

or

با گروهی شرم و بیخویشی وضو کردم.

I made my ablutions attended by modesty and detachment.[12]

the tools of interpretation are blunted: while of a striking, almost *material* presence these metaphors defy analysis, they *cannot* be resolved.[13] Perhaps this is what accounts for their strange force: short-circuiting reason and resisting dissection as a poetic trope, *sedā-ye heyrat-e bidār-e man* is a fragile token of the poem's *being-there.*[14]

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[11] Mohammad Qahramān (56–58) recounts that the line originally read "man mast budam" and the repetition of *mast* was inserted by Mohammad Rezā Shafi'i Kadkani and Ne'mat Mirzāzādeh so as to fix the metre before the poem went to press, without Akhavān's knowledge. Qahramān also mentions a few instances (MIRĀS, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH) where Akhavān knowingly flouted the metre.

[12] Akhavān's wording in Persian here is highly unusual. He literally says, "with a group of modesties," which I have rendered as "attended by modesty," in order to convey the sense of an exteriorised consciousness. Sentiments are no longer perceived as part of the "I" but almost seem to take on life as separate entities: they are placed before the eyes as *khayāl*.

[13] Following Ricœur, the problem could also be cast in terms of *sens* and *référence*: while the *meaning* of Akhavān's metaphors remains puzzling, the force of their *reference* could not be greater – or clearer.

[14] Peter Szondi (1970, 156) speaks of "das Eigenleben der Pindarischen Metaphern gegenüber dem mit ihnen Bedeuteten": in Akhavān too, metaphors occasionally seem to take on a life of their own, beyond the connection to a possible referent. (On this, also see Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 167–168.)

The final lines of NAMĀZ offer no resolution to the paradoxes that constitute the poem. Instead, an enigmatic "I" (who is speaking?) regards the memory scene erected, as if retrospectively, from a future that has become *now*:

***
با تو دارد گفت و گو شوریده مستی.
ـ مستم و دانم که هستم من ـ
ای همه هستی ز تو، آیا تو هم هستی؟

***
a frenzied drunkard is talking to you.
– drunk I am and know that I am –
oh you, the source of all being, do you too exist?

Shafi'i Kadkani notes that the poet here speaks in contradictions: "dar yek ān be nafy va esbāt-e yek chiz mipardāzad."[15] Yet, NAMĀZ neither affirms nor negates the existence of God in any metaphysical sense. What answer could be given to a question that is ultimately nonsensical, for all its validity within the system of formal logic? Rather, a space is opened up where *yes* and *no* cease to obtain: no longer transcendent, eternal entity, God comes into being as the Other of an address, glimpsed in time as the

[15] "Akhavān, Erādeh-ye Ma'tuf be Āzādi" (Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 215). *Hālāt-o Maqāmāt-e M. Omid* is the most vividly engaging single volume that exists on Akhavān and a precious source for the realities Akhavān brought to language. • In his lucid account of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, George Steiner writes: "Truth, [Heidegger] says, relates fundamentally to "nothingness." This "nothingness," however, is not *nihil* ("nothing"), or *Vernichtung* ("annihilation"). It is *Nichtung*, an untranslatable neologism in which "negation" is made an active, creative force. This negation takes away from *Dasein* its self-evidence, it habitual inertia. It restores to *Dasein* its primal astonishment in the face of being" (Steiner 1989, 115). I would like to propose that Akhavān's *nist* in a line like "ham-chenān hastān-e hast-o budegān-e budeh-im ey mard! / na chun ān hastān-e inak jāvdāni nist" (HASTAN) is *defiant* rather than inert: a verb become adjective and thus timeless (what Edward Sapir would call a *modality of existence*; see Jakobson 1977, 93). No mere game of language, Akhavān's *inak jāvdāni nist* is the indictment, irradicable, of a crime.

(counter-)prayer unfolds.[16] No ultimate truth exists outside this relation: Akhavān is a poet of doubts and of words sent out to an unknown alterity. Certitudes or answers are sought in vain.[17] Instead, the impulse to unsettle and disrupt what is postulated as unassailable exists in his poetry from the beginning. Thus, GOZĀRESH (1334, *Zemestān*), belying the serenity of its classicist form, is nothing short of heretical:[18]

مگر پشت این پرده اَبگون
تو ننشته ای بر سریرِ سپهر،
بدست اندرت رشته چند و چون؟

aren't you, behind the sky-blue screen
seated there, on the heavenly throne
the threads of how and why in your hands?

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[16] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (2004, 104–122) devotes a chapter of *La poésie comme expérience* to the « vraie prière » that is Celan's PSALM: "Gelobt seist du, Niemand." (Striking correspondences exist between NAMĀZ and PSALM, to be explored in the future. The two poems date from August 1960 and January 1961, respectively.) Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis is keen and pertinent: "Mais étant dans la forme de la prière, de l'invocation, ce n'est pas de la prière elle-même qu'elle montre l'inanité. Elle parait s'annuler en tant qu'adresse parce qu'elle annule son destinataire en le posant, c'est-à-dire en le nommant – Personne" (Lacoue-Labarthe 2004, 105–106). • Minkowski (1995, 95–103) considers prayer as a *modality* of existence in that, like expectation and hope or desire and striving, it defines a way of being towards the future. Minkowski's belief that "dans la prière j'embrasse en entier le flot mouvant du devenir" could be seen as a gloss on NAMĀZ. • Michael Sells writes of the *apophatic* (counter-)tradition in mediaeval mysticism: "In the very act of asserting the nothingness (no-thingness) of the subject of discourse, apophasis cannot help but posit it as a "thing" or "being," a being it must then unsay, while positing yet more entities that must be unsaid in turn. The result is an open-ended dynamic that strains against its own reifications and ontologies – a language of *dis*ontology" (Sells, 7).

[17] Akhavān (in Kākhi 1382, 335) writes: "dar ān manzumeh [QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN], dar pāyan-āsh jazman nagofteh'am « āri, nist » balkeh gofteh'am « āri nist? ». tafāvot-e zarifi injā vojud dārad chun javāb va bāzgasht va bāzdeh-e nedā ke sedā-st, hamisheh lahn-e nedā-ye nakhostin rā bā khʷod dārad. yaʿni lahn-e hamān sedā'i dārad ke bāzgasht-e ān, sedā-st." Interesting – beyond the refusal of dogma – here is Akhavān's distinction between *nedā* and *sedā*: the (human) call in search of an answer is opposed to the (non-human) monologue of the echo's voice.

[18] On Akhavān proclaiming himself *mazdoshti* see Shafiʿi Kadkani 1390a, 31–32; and Golestān 1369, 766. Also see *Az in Avestā*, 155–156, and *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram*, 28. In the peculiar and seemingly naïve composite of *Mazdosht*, Akhavān fuses the social and the ethical while bypassing the transcendent referent on which all faiths are necessarily based. (For Akhavān's understanding of the movement led by Mazdak see the *qasideh* DERAKHT-E MAʿREFAT in *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram*.)

There is no shying away from the answer, ordained in advance by the particle *magar…*? What is the nameless God to reply? Will he, *can* he reply? A distrust of metaphysical verities – mischievous at times, at other times bitter – subtends all of Akhavān's poetry. It also defines his view of poetic inspiration, fleshed out in the afterword to *Az in Avestā*: "She'r mahsul-e **bi-tabi**-ye ādam ast dar lahazāti ke **sho'ur-e nobovvat** bar u partow andākhteh." After several pages on the necessity of moving away from an ingenuously cavalier understanding of the poet's task, Akhavān then adds a vital qualification: "maqsudam az sho'ur-e nobovvat hargez yek amr-e mā varā' ol-tabi'eh nist."[19] (A worldly, temporal revelation.)

As hopes are deflected from the On High, they become *radically* embodied in the singular, contingent human being. The poem RĀSTI, EY VĀY, ĀYĀ… (1340, *Az in Avestā*), asking, pleading perhaps:

بگو ای شب آیا کائنات این دعا شنید
و مردی بود کز اشک این زن حیا کند ؟

> tell me, oh night, did the universe hear this prayer
> and is there a man shamed by this woman's tears?

is another prayer, another incomprehension addressed, in rhetorical futility, at a *Hörstdu*: the absolute Other of a God that does not answer, whose being is nothing but

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[19] *Az in Avestā*, 129 and 144 (bold print in the original). The fact that Akhavān repeated this definition of poetry *verbatim* on a number of occasions is a measure of its significance. In *L'absolu littéraire*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy locate "ce moment où la littérature s'érige en art" in the theoretical writings of German Romanticism around 1800: "du romantisme […] date la littérature comme son infinie mise en cause et la position perpétuelle de sa propre question" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1968, 265–266). The struggle for an idea of poetry as secular revelation and thus *art* – rather than craft or political instrument – is one of the central, most urgent concerns of Nimā and, in his wake, Akhavān. Contrary to a wide-spread belief, Nimā's and Akhavān's affinity with Romanticism is not owed to real or imagined influences, similarities of imagery, or a certain elegiac tone. Rather, both movements emerged in a historically specific period of transition, a crossroads that called for a new definition of poetry and the poet's task. Literary modernity takes its beginning from here. (On this, also see Vattimo 1991, 95–103.)

echo of a question.[20] Yet as the sound of the echo recedes, a human existence is placed in relation to *us*, by a demonstrative that would otherwise be without sense: *in zan.*

HASTAN (1335) first appeared as the penultimate poem of *Zemestān* and was included again in *Az in Avestā*, puncturing the chronological order of works.[21] The poem is an impassioned *j'accuse* addressed not at the agents of injustice (who are they? they are as nameless and thus as unanswerable as God) but at an existence whose place is left open: another shifter, incarnated with each new reading. Yet not only does *no-one*, addressed, become *everyone* but at the same time, man is constituted as an ethical being: the Persian *mard* points beyond the biologically determined subject. A dialectics of courage and failure is put to work:

در جوار رحمت نا راستینِ آسمان بغنوده ایم، ایمرد !

we are asleep beneath the sky's untruthful mercy, oh man!

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[20] *Hörstdu* belongs to Celan's *Gespräch im Gebirg*, where Jud Klein and Jud Groß talk about speech itself and a *Hearstthou* that never answers: « Sagt er, sagt er… Hörst du, sagt er… Und Hörstdu, gewiß, Hörstdu, der sagt nichts, der antwortet nicht, denn Hörstdu, das ist der mit den Gletschern, der, der sich gefaltet hat, dreimal, und nicht für die Menschen » (Celan 3:171).

[21] A note on chronology. In the second edition of *Zemestān* (1346), Akhavān included five previously unpublished works and four poems that had first appeared in *Arghanun*. HASTAN was reprinted in the second edition of *Az in Avestā* and again in *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz bāyad zist…* (1357), which suggests that Akhavān attached special importance to HASTAN. Also, upsetting the otherwise chronological sequence, two poems were later added to *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*: SHAKIBĀ'I-O FARYĀD (1357) and MĀ, MAN, MĀ (1369). Why these poems were inserted among the earlier works is a question that remains to be asked. (On the *hichim-o chizi kam* of MĀ, MAN, MĀ see the article by Faraj Sarkuhi, http://www.radiofarda.com/content/F7_Commentary_on_Khamenei_Meeting_with_Iranian_Artists/2093557.html; also see Kākhi 1382, 476, and Akhavān's dauntless if veiled aside that could not have been lost on the one it concerned, in the afterword to *Az in Avestā*, 121.)

Akhavān's use of *jevār* in this line is disturbing. Is it heaven that has been brought down or have we, the somnolent ones, been displaced?[22] The poem speaks of sleep next to a false heaven, next to that *other* space: empty, shamefully devoid of truthfulness or grace. Posing the question of theodicy would be idle. There is no God to be invoked, the sky is bare, drained of all qualities except falseness. Perverting ontological hierarchies, the tragedy is enacted between a below and an above that does not exist. There is no shelter, either. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes that "eine Theologie des sich verweigernden Himmel" underlies Paul Celan's IN DIE RILLEN: "dem Kupferhimmel der Bettel/schale dort oben/zulieb."[23] Witness to what it should never have seen, Akhavān's poem renounces even the last glimmer of hope that a negation of God would have sustained.

[22] The word *jevār* already occurs in BI SANGAR, four years before HASTAN, in a context relevant to the later meaning:

دانم اینرا که در جوار شما
کشتزاریست با هزار عطش.
آمدم کز شما بیاموزم،
که چسان ریزم آب بر آتش.

Shah and God are equally aloof, indifferent to a suffering that is close yet unreal, insubstantial to them. In CHĀVUSHI (1335), *jevār* is also associated with agony and death: "sedā'i nist ellā pet-pet-e ranjur-e sham'i dar jevār-e marg."

[23] Gadamer 1973, 27. (Separated by geography and eight years of age, Celan and Akhavān are almost contemporaries. The height of their respective productivity falls roughly within the same period.) Curiously if in an entirely different context and with the tongue-in-cheek poignancy that is proper to him, Akhavān calls *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* a "begging bowl": "mota'assefāneh bāz ham, bar khalāf-e rasm-e motadāvel dar mamālek-e rāqiyeh, in ketāb kashkuli shod az ghazal va gheyr-e ghazal ke ehtemālan bāyad hamān mazal bāshad" (preface to *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*, 10).

Transcendence can no longer be grasped by denial and affirmation. Nothing but a sense of betrayal remains, fundamentally human: "eftekhār-e marg-e pāki dar tariq-e puk."[24]

Dream time

The figures of sleep and of dreaming – in Persian, a single word designates both phenomena: *khʷāb* – are scattered through Akhavān's poetry: the sleep of death at the end of BI SANGAR (1331, *Zemestān*), shepherding the bird away from what can no longer be endured; the empty pitcher in CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH (1335), "k-andar khʷāb binad āb, v-andar āb binad sang"; the sleep of sagas awaking in GOFT-O GU (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), before all hopes in the fabled salvation are shattered and prophecy is cut short, reduced to grammatical absurdity: « man khʷāb dideh'am / to khʷāb dideh'i / u khʷāb dideh'ast. / mā khʷāb di… »/ – « bas-ast. » ; the withered trees in SABUHI (1339) and PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH (1341), transported by sleep to a realm beyond common reality while their bodies remain, impervious and still, alive only as vessels of dreaming; then, at last, the nightmarish chess game of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR (1339, *Az in Avestā*), shadowed forth by an image that, deeply ambivalent, contains the terror of what is to

[24] What Akhavān refers to here is the execution by firing squad at dawn on Tuesday, 27th Mehr 1333, of Mortezā Keyvān and a number of military officers who had opposed the 1332/1953 *coup d'état* against Mosaddeq. Six years later, the iniquity of this execution returns to haunt the song of ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR (1341, *Az in Avestā*). The motif of pure and impure in the poem is probably related to the penname of Mortezā Keyvān, "Delpāk." (Another poem written in memory of Mortezā Keyvān is KEYVĀN SETĀREH BUD by Hushang Ebtehāj Sāyeh.) • For an interesting if – I believe – not unproblematic perspective on Akhavān's relation with the communist Tudeh party see Esmā'il Kho'i's article "M. Omid. « Shā'er-e Shekast »?"

come: “dar khʷāb-hāye man, / in āb-hāye ahli-ye vahshat, / tā chashm binad kārvān-e howl-o hazyān-ast.”[25]

In these poems, parallel time-spaces are constructed where consciousness and the anchoring, originating body no longer coincide: the time-spaces that emerge once reason has yielded to the receptiveness of a subject that is no longer attached to the day’s illusions. Unfolding in a time close to myth, sleep and dreams are governed by a temporality outside the habitual laws of cause and effect: the morphean “I” is taken to a different space, contiguous to the space of waking and history, whose observers and pawns we are. In dream time, the future as *not yet there* comes to mirror the past as *has been*. No longer exiled to a mythical *elsewhere*, both past and future thus appear within reach, tangible for the “I” from its *now.* Yet, the deception of this false promise is soon exposed as the other space – “reality” – keeps receding. No trace will be left by the dreaming mind on what it perceives with cruel lucidity.

PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH is a poem of dreams, memory, and desire. Time is trebled, beyond the distinction that separates the remembered moment (“lahzeh’i khāmush mānd, āngāh / bār-e digar sib-e sorkhi rā ke dar kaf dāsht / be havā andākht.”) from the *now* of remembrance (“che beguyam? hich.”). A third temporal layer is added as the image of drowsy trees by the side of a river tips over, unveiling a different, still bleaker dimension:

با تنی بی خویشتن، گویی که در رؤیا
می بردشان آب، شاید نیز
آبشان برده است.

with a body beside themselves, as if dreaming
they are born by the water,
even raptured maybe.

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[25] The poem was initially to be called KĀBUS (Qahramān, 60; Shafi‘i Kadkani 1390a, 244). On the chess game that frames Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* see Kākhi 1382, 312–318: Akhavān here is adamant that there can be no question of influence, for the poem predates the film.

Disjointed from consciousness, the body is left behind as an empty shell, dead in life, imposing "en moi *l'image impossible à voir* de ce qui me rendra l'égal et le semblable de ce corps dans mon propre destin futur."[26] Yet the ekstasis of the trees, oblivious to their corporeal being, is also, it seems, an act of defiance. Though dreams and sleep – as a cipher for death – arise in the same space where the body, too, is rooted, they cannot be possessed, resist appropriation. Unlike HASTAN, PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH does not raise an indicting voice. There is no heroism here, instead, a quiet cessation as longing atrophies into a deadly slumber. Only the martyred bodies remain, unownable, silent memorial to a future whose possibility keeps hailing from a distance.[27]

In the dystopian dream of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR reality is perverted into a nightmare without escape. The "I" no longer has any autonomy as senseless, unaccountable forces begin to prevail. Have the rules of the game in which the players are engaged been secretly changed? While a treacherous semblance of reason and familiarity (*zanam!*) is maintained the "I" becomes trapped in a state of existential locked-in-ness:

اندیشه ام هرچند
بیدار بود و مرد میدان بود،
اما
انگار بخت آورده بودم من.

even though my mind
was alert and ready for battle
yet
by all appearance I was in luck.

[26] Didi-Huberman 1999, 18.

[27] Blanchot (1955, 347) speaks of "l'informe lourdeur de l'être présent dans l'absence" and writes: "Le cadavre est le reflet se rendant maître de la vie reflétée, l'absorbant, s'identifiant substantiellement à elle en la faisant passer de sa valeur d'usage et de vérité à quelque chose d'incroyable – inusuel et neutre."

Dedicated to Sohrāb Sepehri, CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH is of deceptive artlessness, like a riddle told by a Zen master to his disciples. However, no conciliation beckons in Akhavān's poem, for the chasm that parts friend and foe cuts down to the quick.[28] Insurmountable, the ontological rift is carried over to the gaze. Perception is at two removes, or rather, its object is nested – by a double regression from the perceiving "I" – behind layers of consciousness and sensible matter: water, harbouring the pernicious stone, is seen through the *substance* of dreams. In a paradoxical gesture, the immaterial (*kh^{w}āb*) and the material (*āb*) thus become analogues, approximated not only by their phonetic resemblance. Rather, both configure their own, specific relation to time.

The image of flowing water pervades Akhavān's poetry: an abstract continuum disengaged from the singular, all-encompassing *now* of perception. However, only the metaphor of advancing flow allows progression to be conceptualised, grasped by thought: Ricœur speaks of the upstream and downstream of time as measures of past and future. Sleep and dreams, on the other hand, belong to a different kind of space, an *elsewhen*, both utopian and unmoved. (MORDĀB exemplifies the dilemma inherent in this split temporality.) On the edges of reified, chronological time, the dreaming "I" of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH beholds the inescapable agent of its own end. Yet, death will not, *cannot* come to pass for the conscious mind: it is *absolutely* exterior, perched at the vanishing point of time.[29] Michel de Certeau writes that in mystical speech, "le jeu infini de renvois raconte l'absence de l'Autre."[30] CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH no longer knows any

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[28] GĀHI ANDISHAM KE SHĀYAD SANG HAQ DĀRAD, the closing poem of *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist*, echoes CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH across years and experiences: "man / zendegi rā dust midāram, / marg rā doshman."

[29] Blanchot (1955, 122) asks: "Est-ce que je meurs moi-même, ou bien est-ce que je ne meurs pas toujours autre, de sorte qu'il me faudrait dire qu'à proprement parler *je* ne meurs pas ? Puis-je mourir ? Ai-je le pouvoir de mourir ?"

[30] de Certeau 1987, 317.

God. Instead, death – a willed, meditated death? – is *un*said by the poetic word, stalling the advent of what it evokes.[31]

All narrative or, more properly, *evocative* action is confined to the poem's core: there, a human consciousness whose identity is delayed till the very end of the first sentence ("mishenāsam man") speaks of a circumstance, a perception, a sentiment. What is expressed is set in an undefined present without reference to a *when* or *where*. At its limits, the utterance is framed by blanks signalling not transitions – passages from one theme to another – but *breathturns*, in the Celanian sense. Beyond these turns lies an altogether different space of words spoken by no-one: no willing, suffering "I" exists in the propositions that stand at the poem's beginning and end. Almost perfectly symmetrical, these phrases resemble the equanimous statement of a fact unattached to human existence, a testimony, as it were, without witness. A sense of unease, however, keeps belying the serenity displayed in the framing lines. Something is awry. When the poem's prelude,

از تهی سرشار،
جوییار لحظه ها جاریست.

overbrimming with empty
the stream of moments is aflow.

is echoed in the final verse:

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[31] In a letter to Mohammad Qahramān (102) dated 26/2/39, Akhavān writes: "nemidāni Mohammad jān, gāh-vaqti ta sar-hadd-e jonun va khʷod-koshi pish miravam." (Considering these words, what should be made of Mortezā Kākhi's cryptic remark in the preface to *Sedā-ye Heyrat-e Bidār*, 11?) The fourth stanza of DAR ĀN LAHZEH (1339, *Az in Avestā*) contains the only explicit mention of suicide in Akhavān's poetry:

در آن لحظه گمان کردم یکی هم داشت خود را دار می زد باز
نمی دانم چرا شاید برای آنکه دنیا کشنده ست،
ددست،
درنده ست،
بدست،
یننده ست،
و بیش از اینهمه اسباب خنده ست.

جوییار لحظه ها جاری.

the stream of moments aflow.

a barely perceptible change disturbs the symmetry of repetition. Why has the copula been elided between the opening and its recurrence? Has progression been stunted or speech been discompleted, brought to a halt? The excision of being from the closing verse marks a step outside of lived time: at the point of no return, the arrested echo means a final resignation, for the presence of a *now*, existent, *there* in the moment of perception can only be affirmed by a temporal human subject.[32] Sentient, desiring existence has ceased. Still, something remains, immutable and enduring, beyond the unspeakable threshold: the stream of moments, aflow, to a consciousness that no longer is.[33] (On 4 Shahrivar 1369, when the news of Akhavān's death was announced, the radio broadcast a recording of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH, read by the poet.)

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[32] Derrida (2006, 34) writes of the indissoluble link of existence and language in discourses of negative theology: "Toutes les mystiques apophatiques peuvent aussi se lire comme de puissants discours sur la mort, sur a possibilité (impossible) de la propre mort de l'être-là qui parle, et qui parle de ce qui emporte, interrompt, nie ou annihile sa parole aussi bien que son propre *Dasein*." • Relevant in this connection are also Derrida's essay on "Le supplément de copule" in *Marges de la philosophie* (Derrida 1972b, in particular 232–246) and Benveniste's text on "« Être » et « avoir » dans leur fonctions linguistiques" (Benveniste 1966, 187–207).

[33] Akhavān's use of *hastan* would warrant a separate study. One of the most striking instances of his play with the predication and retraction of being can be found in QASIDEH: punctuating the description of the pond in the poem's first section, the verb *bud* is repeated no less than seven times (lines 24–33), as if to expurge any doubts regarding the veracity, the *having-been-there-ness* of what is recounted. Another poem, VA NADĀNESTAN (1345, *Az in Avestā*), enacts Merleau-Ponty's refusal to distinguish between *être* and *manière d'apparaitre* as the night both *is* and *appears*: "yek shab-e pāk-e āhurā'i / bud-o peydā bud." In TOLU', the sky's being visible, apparent is affirmed and re-affirmed as if evidence to the truth – the actual existence – of an experience. (The examples could easily be continued.)

BĀGH-E MAN (1335), in its unadorned, immaculate simplicity one of Akhavān's most beautiful poems, closes *Zemestān.*[34]

گو بروید، یا نروید، هر چه در هر جا خواهد، یا نمیخواهد.
باغبان و رهگذاری نسیت.
با غ نومیدان،
چشم در راه بهاری نیست.

> let grow or not grow, whatever wherever will grow or not grow.
> there is no gardener and no passer-by.
> the garden of those without hope
> has no expectation of spring.

A paradoxical temporality underlies the expression of *chashm dar rāh budan*: in the image of expectation, of watching over the road that will – perhaps, there is no certainty – guide the longed-for object towards the "I," two movements are opposed to each other, as if tensed in different directions. Rather than continuing to recede to the horizon with each new step taken, the future appears to be moving towards us: Ricœur speaks of "l'imagerie quasi spatiale d'un mouvement *du* futur *vers* le passé *par* le

[34] The first and second imprints of *Zemestān* comprise 54 and 39 poems respectively, with BĀGH-E MAN closing the cycle. The third edition largely follows the second but adds a final work, MANZUMEH-YE SHEKĀR, drafted in 1335 and completed in 1345. (As Akhavān explains in a prefatory note, "dar shomār-e fehrest didam SHEKĀR ettefāqan chehelomin manzel-e in kārvān oftādeh'ast va mitavānad « chelleh-ye Zemestān » rā tamām konad." Maybe the number should have remained imperfect and without closure.)

présent."[35] In BĀGH-E MAN, time is spatialised while the present becomes the placeholder of an impossible future. Absences abound, deeply equivocal. There is no wayfarer and no-one to tend to the garden. Hope has been abandoned. Yet the repeated affirmations of *nist* are strangely powerless to *enact* the negation they seem to carry.[36] The curse of expectancy upholds the *now*.

The figure of what is no longer there, of existence denied or retracted, lies at the very core of Akhavān's writing: the negative particles woven through ANDUH (1333, *Zemestān*), anacruses of absence and desolation; the stream of moments, *az tohi sarshār*, framing CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH; the memory traces in KHAZĀNI and NĀZHU (1335), the blinded, disillumined night at the end of GHAZAL 3 (1336); the paradoxical condition of *'oryāni-ye anbuh* in PEYGHĀM (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*); the recital of all that could pierce the solitude of a dead water mirroring *nothing* – the sky's emptiness – in VA NA HICH (1339, *Az in Avestā*). Curiously, however, the negated, retracted, withheld being in all these instances does not strain towards a lost past. Rather, nostalgia, here as elsewhere in Akhavān, looks to the future. (It is no accident that BĀGH-E MAN is dedicated to Yadollāh Qarā'i, "be yād-e ān « gozashteh »-ye khub." Set in quotation marks, the "past" of a memory becomes wishful prolepsis.)

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[35] Ricœur 1983, 45. • Eugène Minkowski notes, "dans l'activité nous tendons vers l'avenir, dans l'attente, par contre, *nous vivons le temps en sens inverse*, pour ainsi dire ; nous voyons l'avenir venir vers nous et attendons que cet avenir (prévu) devienne présent" (Minkowksi 1995, 80; italics added). • In his reading of Georg Trakl's poem ES IST DIE SEELE EIN FREMDES AUF ERDEN, Heidegger (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 41) writes: "Das Fremde geht suchend auf den Ort zu, wo es als ein Wanderndes bleiben kann. « Fremdes » folgt schon, ihm selber kaum enthüllt, dem Ruf auf den Weg in sein Eigenes." Heidegger's text is all the more pertinent to our discussion in that it looks at Trakl's pervasive use of adjectives and verbs as nominalised essences – a characteristic also of Akhavān's poetry, emblematised in the opening of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH: *az tohi sarshār*.

[36] For a deeper understanding of the semantics of negation from a linguistic and logico-philosophical perspective see Lawrence R. Horn's comprehensive study *A Natural History of Negation.*

In the erased presences of Akhavān's poetry, the possibility of a different time, discontinuous and utopian, is adumbrated. When BĀGH-E MAN, ANDUH or VA NA HICH mourn the absence of a warmer season breaking through the rigour of winter, of an eye's nocturnal sparkle auguring companionship, or of a bird redeeming the lagoon's isolation, no mere negativity is invoked. Instead, the absences constituting these poems bring forth a plenitude: the plenitude of a lived present, mindful of what has been lost while proudly recanting any desire for a more clement age to arrive. Dignified and austere, the closing lines of BĀGH-E MAN evoke the purgatory of an eternalised moment:

باغ بی برگی
خنده اش خونیست اشک آمیز
جاودان بر اسب یال افشانِ زردش میچمد در آن
پادشاه فصلها، پائیز.

the garden of yieldedness
its laughter is tear-alloyed blood.
the king of seasons, autumn,
on his flying-maned dun parades through it for eternity.[37]

Language is pared down to its skeletal essence, pure image. Only an all-encompassing absence remains into which past and future have been absorbed: *bāgh-e bi-bargi* is a figure of expectation without object, enshrined in a timeless autumn while commemorating a spring still to come.

[37] The expression of *bāgh-e bi-bargi* is virtually untranslatable. Akhavān here plays on the multiple significations of *barg*, whose dominant meaning is the leaf of a tree. Being without *barg* therefore means "leafless" but also suggests an absence of intentions, defences, and material goods: a mendicancy, as it were. For lack of an English equivalent, I have chosen to render *bi-bargi* as "yieldedness," hoping thereby to capture at least some of the meaning in its material *and* spiritual aspects: the garden with the arrival of winter both gives up its foliage and enters a paradoxical state of detached *passio.*

Another inversion of time and space is enacted in MANZELI DAR DUR-DAST (1341), the poem that, after a prefatory *ghazal,* opens *Az in Avestā.*[38] At the opposite pole of NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? with is narrative polyphony and multi-layered texture the lyricism of MANZELI DAR DUR-DAST marks the incipience of an end. The traveller's home in the distance is not the home he returns to as the familiar destination of a journey. Rather, it is the nameless space of a future at the limit of an unmapped trail:

کاش این را نیز می دانستم، ای نشناخته منزل !
که ای این بیغوله تا آنجا، کدامین راه
یا کدام ست آن که بیراه ست.

if only I knew this too, oh unknown abode!
which road leads from this nook to there
and which is the one that strays.

The "I" seems strangely immobile while distances dwindle with each passing instant, each word that is uttered. Here, too, the future cannot be reached but only awaited and, finally, embraced as the horizon that keeps approaching. It is this coincidence – or rather, unresolved tension – of opposing movements that is mirrored in the twofold sense of *bighuleh*, signifying at once intimate nook and forsaken, ruined place, far apart from human habitation: a meaning that is split along the axis of familiarity and distance, undecided and double. Obscure certainty, the end is there from the beginning, not as future but present: "manzeli dar dur-dasti *hast* bi shakk har mosāfer rā." There is no

[38] The classical form of the introductory *ghazal* is mirrored by an – oddly pedestrian – *masnavi* at the very end of the book's afterword. • MANZELI DAR DUR-DAST is dedicated to Mohammad Qahramān, for whom the poem evokes "tanhā'i-ye shab-e avval-e qabr" (Qahramān, 61–62). Indeed, MANZELI DAR DUR-DAST recalls CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH and the "I"s anxiety in the face of extinction.

choice and no escape as the road itself draws the traveller towards his or her ultimate destination.[39]

Perverting the natural order of things, both time and space are turned on their head in BĀZGASHT-E ZĀGHĀN (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*):

بر آبگون بخاکستری گراینده،
در آن زمان که به روز
گذشته نام گذارند، و بر شب آینده.

on the azure turning grey,
at that time when we call the day
past and the night future.

The poem captures a moment of transition, without faith or law, as the rules of day have ceased to hold and those of night are not yet in force. A nauseous dialectics of being and semblance is put into play where nothing appears as what it is but rather as its own antithesis. Violence is not named but enacted metaphorically when the sources of light are seized by crows. A drab and trivial apocalypse without judgement or redemption. An *anti-* or *non-time*, also, whose poetic expression is the uneasy hybrid of modern form paired with images and similes that imitate the logic of a classical *qasideh.*

KHAZĀNI (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) is a poem of time and bereavement, perpetuated in the image – at once trope and memory – of what is gone: "die Schlittenspur des Verlorenen," as Paul Celan says in HEIMKEHR.[40] Absence is not extinguished, obliviated. Rather, by the sixfold repetition of *ānak* and *inak* – the deictics that keep recurring in Akhavān's poetry – the narrative *then* is retrieved for the time of the poem, which itself coincides with the instance of reading. Past and present are

[39] The "I" that speaks in the poem does not belong exclusively to Akhavān but to *every traveller*, "als ob er gar nicht mehr sich selbst meinte, sondern den Leser in seine Ich-Gestalt selbst hineinzöge" (Gadamer 1973, 11). • In MARD-O MARKAB, the road's gravitational force becomes attribute: "gām-kh^{w}āreh jāddeh-ye hamvār."

[40] "Weithin gelagertes Weiß. / Drüberhin, endlos, / die Schlittenspur des Verlorenen" (SPRACHGITTER, Celan 2003, 94).

superposed.[41] As the gesture pointing to the lacuna – *there!* – is coupled in rhyme with the memory of a presence, the imaginary *now* of the poem becomes witness to what has been lost: "ānak bar ān chenār-e javān, ānak / khāli fotādeh lāneh-ye ān laklak." Erased from the memory of days are the infinite verbs of a doing without beginning or end, anchored solely in our perception: the stork's raising its head to the sky, cleaning its plumage. Yet paradoxically, the depiction of the tree's forsaken, birdless branches creates a presence: *another* presence, of memory carried over by words. In the poem's white magic, birdsong and spring enter the sign of desire, bodying forth what is no longer there: "sard-e sokut-e khʷod rā besarā'im / pā'izam ! ey qanāri-ye ghamginam !"[42]

The simple past of the verbs in KHAZĀNI signals both immediacy and finality: a departure that has just happened – not yet become memory for the "I" – and, at the same time, irretrievable *gone-ness*:

رفتند مرغکان طلائی بال،
از سردی و سکوت سیه جستند،

[41] Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* describes the dynamics of *gone-ness* and presence retrieved: *fort-da* (Felstiner 2001, 196 and 317). • Derrida (1986, 32) writes of the date: "Il faut qu'en elle le non-répétable (*unwiederholbar*) se répète, efface en lui la singularité irréductible qu'il dénote." However, as time is halted and the seasons no longer pass in KHAZĀNI, the law of recurrence becomes inoperative and what is gone takes on an absolute, irreducible singularity. • On the meaning and function of deictics as *shifters* or, as he calls them, *termes voyageurs*, analogous to the pronouns of "I" and "you," see Ricœur 1990, 69–72. Also see Benveniste's vital text on "Le langage et l'expérience humain" (Benveniste 1974, specifically pages 68–69) and the section devoted to *l'homme dans la langue* (Benveniste 1966, 225–288). In Benveniste's analysis (1966, 253), "la deixis est contemporaine de l'instance de discours qui porte l'indicateur de personne; de cette référence le démonstratif tire son caractère chaque fois unique et particulier, qui est l'unité de l'instance de discours à laquelle il se réfère. L'essentiel est donc la relation entre l'indicateur (de personne, de temps, de lieu, d'objet montré, etc.) et la *présente* instance de discours."

[42] In his short autobiographical fragment *Agesilaus Santander*, Walter Benjamin (1974, VI, 523) invokes an angel who dwells in what has been dispossessed: "Der Engel aber ähnelt allem, wovon ich mich habe trennen müssen: den Menschen und zumal den Dingen. In den Dingen, die ich nicht mehr habe, haust er."

وز بید و کاج و سرو نظر بستند.

gone are the little golden-winged birds
they fled the cold and black silence
abandoning willow, cypress and pine.

Both desire and renunciation in Persian belong to the eye. When all hope of attainment becomes illusory, the eye is closed or veiled to the thing it longs for. At the same time, existence itself seems to depend on the presence of a perceiving, desiring subject: as if by averting their gaze the birds of KHAZĀNI had not so much condemned the garden to oblivion but suspended the possibility of another spring.

Akhavān's poetry cannot be called visual in any concrete or painterly sense.[43] His images are abstract, born from the mind rather than calqued on exterior nature. Yet eye and gaze pervade his works as immaterial, temporal figures of longing. In BI SANGAR (1331, *Zemestān*), the butterfly's journey is first winged but then mortally blighted by a desire to break free and become *other*:

بالها را بشوق بر هم زد
از نشاط تنفس آزاد
با نگاهی حریص و آشفته
همره آرزو براه افتاد

ardently it flapped its wings
rejoicing to take a free breath
it set out along with desire
and a covetous, restless gaze

The precarious beauty of a gaze traversing not space but time is evoked in GHAZAL 1 (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), at once cause and cure of a *mal du temps*:

بسته - بین من و آن آرزوی گمشده ام
پل لرزنده ئی از حسرت و اندوه - نگاه

arched – between me and that lost desire of mine
a faltering bridge of longing and grief – the gaze

[43] Simin Behbahāni (in Qāsemzādeh, 201) puts it succinctly: "Akhavān, be towr-e kolli, tasvir-sāz nist. […] este'āreh-hāye Akhavān nodratan mesl-e « akhm-e jangal » yā « khamyāzeh-ye kuh » vajh-e shebh-e 'eyni va malmus dārad." This is also, according to Behbahāni, what distinguishes Akhavān's images from classical metaphors.

In the slightly giddy syntactic coils of TOLU‘ (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), the gaze is not restrained by the enclosure, *chārchub-e didgāh*, from where the poem’s “I” speaks and looks on.[44] As it follows the flight of pigeons soaring above a neighbour’s roof, the gaze ceases to be mere appurtenance of a perceiving mind:

من نگاهم مثل نو پرواز گنجشک سحر خیزی
پلّه پلّه رفته بی پروا به اوجی دور و زین پرواز،
لذتم چون لذتِ کبوتر باز.

> step for step like a newly fledged early sparrow
> my gaze has climbed fearlessly to a distant height and from this flight
> my pleasure resembles the pigeon keeper’s.

The lines separating vicarious from unmediated experience become blurred and the “I,” both other and same, is entranced by what it witnesses. In this sense, TOLU‘ is also a poem about poetry itself and the desire at the origin of all literature: to enter – for one moment, however fleeting – the time-space of the text.

Profoundly allegorical, PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH (1341, *Az in Avestā*) is the lyric imprecation of an age: “nefrat-o nefrin-nāmeh-ye Omid.”[45] As in TOLU‘, spaces become charged and opposed to each other, projections of liberty and confinement.

و نگاهم مثل پروانه
در فضای با غ او می گشت،
گشتن غمگین پری در با غ افسانه.

> and like a butterfly my gaze
> roved through the space of her garden
> a sad fairy roving in the garden of myth.

Here, a split has secretly taken place as the “I”s reverie is no longer naïve: the fairy *knows* that the garden belongs to the realm of legend, is a figment of longing, without

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[44] Akhavān himself was a keeper of homing pigeons, which is why the image of doves found its way into poems like HASTAN, TOLU‘, and QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, not as an abstract figure but as a meaning charged with life. (On Akhavān’s *kaftar-bāzi* see Shafi‘i Kadkani 1390a, 89–90).

[45] Shafi‘i Kadkani (1390a, 185).

objective reality. Only desire itself and the fact of relation – dialogue – persist. Before long, the gaze is recalled and turned inwards:

من نگاهم را چون مرغی مرده سوی باغ خود بردم.

I brought my gaze like a dead bird back towards my own garden.

Akhavān knows of the double temporality inherent in any narrative act. There is no going back to an experience that is innocent of the future: time – as retrospective consciousness – is always already inscribed in the narrating "I"s relation to what it recounts.[46] Thus, the fairy, as it enters the time of the poem, is marked with the stigmata of a disenchantment that has yet to be told. The past is lost, irretrievably, while the specious promise of a *different* future keeps wearing the present away.[47]

The immobilised now

There is an absolute stillness at the core of many of Akhavān's poems, as if all movement, even time itself were taking place elsewhere. In PEYGHĀM (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), both *has-been* and *will-be* have receded into a mythical distance, beyond the reach of the imagination.

چون درختی در زمستانم،
بی که پندارد بهاری بود و خواهد بود.

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[46] Ricœur speaks of "le passé de la voix narrative, qui n'est ni celui d'une mémoire, ni celui de l'historiographie, mais celui qui résulte du rapport de postériorité de la voix narrative par rapport à l'histoire qu'elle raconte" (Ricœur 1985, *Temps et récit II*, 187). • In KATIBEH (1340, *Az in Avestā*) a perceptual shift separates past from present, effecting a subtle but final disjunction: as the boulder is reversed, the narrator's observation "va shab shatt-e jalili bud por mahtāb" becomes "va shab shatt-e 'alili bud por mahtāb." The phonetic variation is minimal yet, in between the two moments, a world has become estranged.

[47] Esmā'il Kho'i (in Qāsemzādeh, 280) has described Akhavān's fatal dilemma with poignant lucidity.

like a tree in winter I am without faith
that spring there was and will be.

Past and future no longer touch the present. While any spring there may have been is suspended in the historical past of *bud*, an amorphous *now* has eroded all sense of time as progression. Hope is numbed, atrophied, entombed in a moment that is absolutely disjointed.

In NĀZHU (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), the four seasons – figures of elapsing and recurring time – are condensed in the single, perennial *being-there* of the pine tree.

[...]
ناژوی سالخورده فرو هشته بال و پر.
[...]
پر جست و خیز و بیهوده گو طوطی بهار،
اندیشناک قمریِ تابستان،
اندوهگین قناریِ پائیز،
خاموش و خستهِ زا غ زمستان.
اما
او
با میوه همیشگیش، سبزی مدام،
عمری گرفته خو.

[...]
the old pine tree has laid down its plumage.
[...]
spring's frisky and chattering parrot,
summer's wistful dove ,
autumn's plaintive canary,
winter's crow, silent and weary,
yet
it
for a lifetime has grown attached
to its perennial fruit, evergreen.

In the image of the evergreen tree, time appears as an insubstantial illusion without purchase on our existence, powerless to effect any change. However, while lived human time has congealed into an endless winter, a different kind of time is inscribed in the poem. Akhavān's language is kaleidoscopic, shot through with an *other* cadence, an *other* way of exorcising the real metaphorically: NĀZHU echoes, almost imperceptibly, a

line from the *divān* of Manuchehri Dāmghāni (d. 432 A.H.) evoking the image of pines on a wintery day.[48] A spectral voice seems to resonate across more than nine hundred years. Yet NĀZHU is profoundly modern, in spite of the distant idiom to which it gives shelter. There is no classical imitation: instead, difference is integrated *as* difference, from the vantage-point of our own day. In the poem's many-voiced texture a historical consciousness can be glimpsed that counteracts and transcends, paradoxically, the deadlock of non-time crippling the garden. Both irreducibly foreign and *impression fugitive* in the present, the word hushed by time is once again sounded.[49] Perspective, mindful of distances, remains honoured, and while a circular, inescapable *now* seems to have engulfed past and future, a space opens up, *elsewhere*: the echo-space of a poetry where the depth of time – history – is unconcealed by language itself.

In BARF (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), the linearity of time – its progression towards a point beckoning in the future – is diffused to become snowbound, ambient *space*. Any *telos* is sucked into this space and any endeavour to reach the end of the way reduced to absurdity:

راه بود و راه ـ این هرجائیِ افتاده ـ این همزاد پای آدم خاکی
[…]
پیش چشمم خفته اینک راه پیموده.

there was the path and the path – spread out all around – connate with the steps of mortal man

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[48] The specific verse reads: "to gu'i be bāgh andarun ruz-e barf / saff-e nāzhuvān-o saff-e 'ar'arān" and belongs to the *qasideh* beginning with "bar āmad ze kuh abr-e māzandarān." Considering that Akhavān was a *poeta doctus* – *adib* – and well acquainted with the poetry of Manuchehri, the correspondences between the two poems are probably not accidental: already seven years before NĀZHU, the twenty-year-old poet had composed KHOTBEH-YE ORDIBEHESHT (1328, *Arghanun*) in *esteqbāl* of a *qasideh* by Manuchehri (Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 111). (On the range and depth of Akhavān's knowledge of Persian literary history see ibid., 205.)

[49] De Certeau (1987, 224) asks, "les mots que le temps a gelés vont-ils redevenir des voix (adressées par qui et à qui?)?" • I have borrowed the expression from Clément Rosset's essai, *Impressions fugitives : L'ombre, le reflet, l'écho*.

[…]
and, stretched out before my eyes, there it is, the path travelled.

Movement is voided of sense as the snow keeps on falling.[50]

عرصه سر در گمیها مانده و بیدرکجائیها.
باد چون بارانِ سوزن، آب چون آهن.
بی نشانیها فروِ برده نشانها را.

an expanse of perplexities and limbos remained,
wind like pelting needles, water like iron.
signlessnesses had submerged signs.

As we are sucked deeper into the maelstrom of the blizzard, snow ceases to be called by its name. Instead, it becomes pure quality or, rather, pure *state*:

این کجبارِ خامشبار
[…]
« بی کران وحشت انگیزی ست.
خامشِ خاکستری هم بارد و بارد.
وین سکوت پیر ساکت نیز
هیچ پیغامی نمی آرد.

this cross-bearing, still-bearing fall
[…]
is terrifying boundlessness.
and the hushed grey falls and falls.
with this silent old silence
bearing no message either.

The poem's last lines evoke the vertigo of an "I" that has lost all traction, fatally unable to discern the course of its footprints, signposts of past and future:

جای پاها باز هم گوئی
دیده میشد، لیک
برف میبارید.
باز میگشتم،
برف میبارید.
برف میبارید. میبارید. میبارید …

جای پاهای مرا هم برف پوشانده ست.

as if footprints

[50] In the words of Emmanuel Levinas (2001, 23): "Le mouvement ainsi décrit va du lieu vers le non-lieu, d'ici vers l'utopie."

could still be discerned, yet
snow was falling.
I kept returning,
snow was falling.
snow was falling. falling. falling …

the snow has covered my footprints too.

Wresting the poem from its storied past, the final verse takes the "I" – *jenen Einzelnen* – into the moment of enunciation. The snow has covered *my* steps: as past continuous gives way to perfect, the narrator's consciousness is effaced by an "I" speaking, suddenly, from a *now*. Fiction itself has collapsed in a terminal act of disorientation.

At the bastard end of stillness, time is stagnant and numb, all too rarely fissured by the prospect of a different temporality: a possible future. The marshes of FARĀMUSH (1333, *Zemestān*), MORDĀB I (1334, *Zemestān*) and MORDĀB II (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) are figures of time hollowed out: dead inlets of existence, sidetracked and mocked ("in rud-e bi raftār"!) by history.[51] In PARASTĀR (1341, *Az in Avestā*), the "I" wakes at the core of the night. There is no lapse of time, only a moment of consciousness – a coming to speech – that briefly pierces the darkness against which it is set:

من این میگویم و دنباله دارد شب.

I am saying this and the night continues.

Elsewhere, language itself seems to stagnate. Fragmented questions, ellipses, silences abound. Speech becomes emptied of referent and direction. Yet perhaps the repetitions, syllables and words petering out into babble, perhaps Akhavān's *Pallaksch* is a way of tricking time into existence?[52] When the municipal clock in SĀAT-E BOZORG (1337, *Ākhar-*

[51] In 1335, Akhavān accompanied Ebrāhim Golestān, who wanted to film on location in Khuzestān, Iran's southernmost province (see Golestān 756–757). The image of the lagoon in MORDĀB and the brooding heat in GELEH may well be owed to the journey.

[52] Felstiner (2001, 173–174) considers the resonances of *Pallaksch* for Celan. On Hölderlin's *Pallaksch*, see Jakobson 1976, 65.

e Shāhnāmeh) falls silent and ceases to scan the hours' passing, more than the measure of time has been lost. Life itself enters a state of torpor, a sprawling disease that blurs the memory of a more dignified age. The atrophy of human remembrance sets in as time is reduced to the amorphous, lifeless mass of a present that knows no history. (All of Akhavān's writing – both literary and critical – is an attempt to salvage the depth of time as the necessary ground on which historical thinking is based.) At the point where meaning ends and language regresses into a stage of inchoate sounds, speech – the *act* of enunciation – is upheld as the final resource against time being levelled into oblivion. The clock's tick-tack therefore not only tells hours and days but allows memory to condense along a structure of temporal progression. Other poems have less faith in language. Or perhaps, the linguistic sign there is harnessed differently, to give shape to absence, not possibility. In CHE ĀVĀZ-HĀ (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) the repetitions and doublings of words and word parts are vacuous traces of hopes dispossessed.[53] Tautology takes the place of meaningful propositions, reducing the loss of illusions to an inescapably banal ritornello of the ever-same. Even questions are turned in on themselves and wither into soliloquy. Thus, no answer exists to the succession of *whats*, repeated and pluralised triply: *che-hā, che-hā, che-hā*. Cored of its substance – *āvāz* – the interrogative instead becomes an empty, blank sound of incomprehension: a resonance, devoid of consciousness, like a random pebble skidding over a surface.

The breakdown not only of language at the end of SORUD-E PANĀHANDEH (1334, *Zemestān*):

- « راهم ... دهید آی ! ... پناهم دهید ... آی !
هو .. هوی ... های .. های ... !

– « let me … in oh! … give me shelter … oh!
hoo .. hooui … how … how … »

[53] In the words of Levinas (2002, 199), "la signifiance de la trace consiste à signifier sans faire apparaitre."

or the echo's mock affirmation that closes QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN:

- « ... غم دل با تو گویم، غار !
بگو آیا مرا دیگر امید رستگاری نیست ؟ »
صدا نالنده پاسخ داد :
« ... آری نیست ؟ »

– « ... cave, let me tell you my grief!
tell me, is all hope of salvation now gone?
the voice responded plaintively:
« ... now gone? »[54]

are instances of meaning short-circuited and coming to a halt while the mechanism of speech rumbles on: the idle speed of time.

Embedded in time

There is no distinct beginning or end to many poems in *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* and *Az in Avestā*, as if fiction itself could be abolished by a refusal to separate narrative time from the *now*.[55] A number of illusionist tricks are deployed to suggest that no disjunction exists between the temporal orders: sudden entries into a continuous tense, past or present (BARF: "pāsi az shab rafteh bud-o barf mibārid"), deictics that have no meaning as long as their referent is obscure, comparatives whose zero point is not given (KATIBEH: "fotādeh takhteh-sang ān-suy-tar, engār kuhi bud."), three-part ellipses on the

[54] Of Celan's strange – Eckhartian – coinage *ichten* in EINMAL (Celan 2003, 214), suggestive of both the German for "I" and an imagined verb *to nothing* (*nichten*), Derrida says: "il répète, en quelque sorte, *l'anéanti sans négation* dans ce qui résonne aussi comme la production ou la constitution d'un *je* (*ich*), un et infini, une fois et à l'infini, le pas entre le rien (*Nichts*) et la lumière (*Licht*)" (Derrida 1986, 73–74; italics added).

[55] The name *Az in Avestā* seems to suggest that the book itself is a fragment, offering glimpses of an incomplete text, interrupted by a reader. (In the afterword, 223, Akhavān gives his motives for choosing the title and mentions that the book was initially to be called *Avestā-ye Digar*, "vali chun ba'd didam « digar »-hā ziyād shodand, monsaref shodam." For a possible – if anecdotal rather than conceptual – origin of *Avestā* as title see Qahramān, 18–19.)

border of silence and speech (MARD-O MARKAB: "… goft rāvi: rāh az āyand-o ravand āsud"), subordinate clauses alleging to continue a sentence left off in the past, acts of address whose "I" and "you" are anchored in a yet unknown constellation of speech (ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR: "ammā nemidāni che shab-hā'i sahar kardam."), or iterances of an origin – a first moment – that remains unsaid (RĀSTI, EY VĀY, ĀYĀ…: "degar rah shab āmad tā jahāni siā konad"). No frame closes the poem off from the instance of its narration. Instead, we become witnesses of a plot that has been unfolding for an indefinite time, like passers-by randomly chancing upon a scene or eavesdropping on an old story – *dāstāni na tāzeh* – being told, as in GOFT-O GU (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*):

« … باری، حکایتی ست.
حتی شنیده ام
بارانی آماده ست و براه افباده سیل.

– « … well so, here's a story.
I've even heard
that rain has come and a flood started.

Akhavān's poems abound with subtle peripeties of narration and tone. Even the titles of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR or NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? announce interruptions: the event of something (what?) breaking into the pool of a *now.* The Persian language in general has a tendency to spatialise time: in words like *gāh(i)*, *nāgāh / nāgah(ān)*, *bi-gāh*, *āngāh*, *dir-gāh*, or *sahar-gāh* and *shām-gāh*, the instant turns *locus* and time literally *takes place*, while in expressions like *digar rāh* and *pey-ā-pey / pey dar pey*, recurrence and continuity are cast in the image of paths and tracks, as if a lost moment could be retraced by human steps. Not halting at adverbial uses of time, the mechanism of detemporalisation also extends to the seasons: *tābestān* and *zemestān* are thought of as dominions, not phases of heat or cold. In Akhavān, however, the conceptual shift from time as progression to time as space is more than as a linguistic feature taken to its last consequence. The leap is greater, more categorical. Symbolically charged, winter and

night are withdrawn from the cyclical series to which they belong and become absolute, self-existent entities: we can no longer trust that another spring, another day will come to drive back frost and gloom. Instead, the night is erected as a blank volume, a void without circumference in whose centre the "I" is trapped, as in ANDUH (1333, *Zemestān*) or GELEH (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*):

شب خامش ست و خفته در انبان تنگ وی
شهر پلید کودن دون، شهر روسپی،
ناشسته دست و رو.

> still is the night and asleep in its tight bellows
> the filthy, base, obtuse city, the whore city,
> unwashed her face and hands.

Like the road in BARF whose existence has become *ham-zād-e pā-ye ādam-e khāki* so darkness, too, seems indissociable from the human condition.[56] Despoiled of time – memories of a past and prospects of a future – night-space is *categorically* opposed to the temporal contingency of day. Night-space is also the ground from which poetry arises. When asked for its origin, the butterfly in BI SANGAR (1327, *Zemestān*) replies, each of three times: « az shabestān-e she'r āmādeh'am ». There is no escape and no shelter in an age whose sound is the *sorud-e kolbeh-ye bi rowzan-e shab* (SAG-HĀ-O GORG-HĀ, 1332, *Zemestān*), an inhuman song emerging from the earth's *nyxtopia*: the *shabestān-e gham-ālud-e zamin* (FARĀMUSH, 1333, *Zemestān*). The night is impervious, hostile to human existence, it rejects the nocturnal wayfarer. As the impossible mean of infinite open spaces and treacherous intimacy, "biābān-e shabi chun kheymeh-ye doshman" (SOBH, 1335, *Az in Avestā*) constringes being itself. No longer metaphorical exteriorisation of an affective state but autonomous, erratic force, Akhavān's night

[56] The figure of the night resonates through an anti-tradition of thought, from antiquity to our time: the dark night of the soul in St. John of the Cross and *la nuit* as the original metaphor in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, to name but two instances. (A study of the night as figure in mediaeval Persian and Arabic mystical writings would open up exciting intellectual territory.)

transcends or, more properly speaking, *radicalises* allegory: it resembles what Maurice Blanchot calls *l'autre nuit*, inordinate, disjoined, emptied even of the day's absence.[57] (Nimā's night still hopes for the day, is nocturnal only in so far as daylight – the delivery from ignorance and oppression – has not yet arrived. The dualism of symbols here is unambiguous.) In QASIDEH (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), the night, having lost its dawn, becomes literally *dis*astrous, alien, a space of exile for the "I" where time no longer passes:

در شبِ قطبی،
- این سحر گم کرده بی کوکب قطبی -
در شب جاوید،
زی شبستان غریب من
- نقبی از زندان به کشتنگاه -
برگ زردی هم نیارد باد ولگردی،
از خزانِ جاودانیِ بیشه خورشید.

in the polar night
– this starless night with its forgone dawn –
in the eternal night
no stray gust of wind drifts a yellow leaf
to my remote nyktopolis
– a tunnel from jail to execution place –
from the sun's grove and its perpetual autumn.

It is *time* – the immaterial, protean matrix of human perception – that weaves between the poem and what lies beyond it, as if the written word were not confined in itself, constituting a separate reality. Akhavān's texts are porous interfaces where the – imaginary? – past of an experience and the present, the *being-there*, now, of an embodied consciousness meet. The fabric of time is laid bare in glimpses of an outside, glimpses that remain enigmatic if the poem for us is nothing but the sclerotic trace of

[57] "Il y a toujours un moment où, dans la nuit, la bête doit entendre l'autre bête. C'est l'*autre* nuit. Cela n'est nullement terrifiant, cela ne dit rien d'extraordinaire – rien de commun avec les fantômes et les extases –, ce n'est qu'un susurrement imperceptible, un bruit qu'on distingue à peine du silence, l'écoulement de sable du silence" (Blanchot 1955, 221).

what is gone or never was.[58] In ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, a different order of being irrupts as the phantasmagorical chess game advances and one of the knights is suddenly *dead*: no longer the figment, inanimate, of a poet's mind but mortal creature, the martyred knight belies the game's irreality. Memory, dream and the rawness of a hallucinatory truth bleed into each other. The walls of metaphor have come down. Thus, when a physical "I" breaks into the symbolic time of the poem in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? we know that the storyteller's lie, the fiction spread out before us, is deeply fragile: vulnerable to an outside in which human experience, suffering as much as joy, is *real*, inscribed not on the page but the body.

در چار چار زمستان
من دیدم او نیز میدید
آن ژنده پوش جوان را که ناگاه
صرع دروغینش از پا در انداخت
یکچند نقش زمین بود
آنگاه
غلت دروغینش افکند در جوی،
جویی که لای و لجنهای آن راستین بود
وآنگاه دیدم - و با شرم و وحشت -
خون، راستی خون گلگون،
خونی که از گوشه ابروی مرد
لای و لجن را بجای خدا و خداوند
آلوده وحشت و شرم میکرد.

در جوی چون کفچه مار مهیبی
نفت غلیظ و سیاهی روان بود
می برد و می برد و می برد
آن پاره های جگر، تکه های دلم را
[...]

[58] One of Ricœur's main concerns in *La métaphore vive* and *Temps et récit* is to offer a new paradigm for thinking about the reality – or truth value – of historical versus fictional past. According to Ricœur, both historical and fictional narrative configure a past event which thereby becomes available to the present. There is no *structural* difference between the narrative configuration of actual and imaginary events. The past remains without reach, irrespective of any truth, while our only access to what may have been is through the text: a text that in itself does not betray the ontological nature of its referent.

in the deep of winter
I saw he saw too
that young man in shabby clothes
suddenly a fake fit knocked him down
for a while he lay there on the ground
then
a fake turn flung him in the canal
a canal whose lees and dregs were real
and then – ashamed and terrified – we saw
blood, indeed crimson blood,
blood that from the edge of the man's eyebrow
was imbuing not god and lord but lees and dregs
with shame and terror

in the canal like a frightening cobra
viscous black oil was afloat
carrying away and away and away
those pieces of liver, bits of my heart
[…]

The "I" whose heart and liver are carried away in pieces by the canal's oil-slicked waters has ceased to be that of a mere observer. Just as truth and falsehood have shown themselves deeply fallible categories so, too, the make-belief of a detached auctorial consciousness collapses. The narrator has become implicated, drawn into his story, laying down the defences that a fictional subjectivity offers. (It is the same crudely unmasked existence of an "I" that all of a sudden comes to speak in MARD-O MARKAB: "dar fazā-ye kheymeh'i chun sineh-ye man tang." For a passing moment, the conceit of narrative is suspended.)

In NĀGAH…?, shadows must be guarded from a night that, voracious and baleful, seizes them off humans and things. With nightfall, the myriad other darknesses – shadows faithful to their bearers – are extinguished by a totality that admits of no rival. Thus, when the poem's narrator hides his own shadow from the night's devouring gaze an unspoken act of defiance is committed. Like an earthly Dante accompanied by Virgil's ghost, narrator and shadow set out on a journey through the night's angst-ridden space. At first, the shadow is still tractable, a quasi accidental being:

هر جا که من گفتم، آمد.

wherever I told to him to he came.

Soon, however, the shadow begins to *see*:

او دید، من نیز دیدم.

he saw, I saw too.

Before it eventually merges – almost – with the "I":

دیگر بمن تکیه کن، ای من، ایدوست، [...]

now lean on me, oh me, oh friend[, ...]

The figure of the shadow has nothing intrinsically uncanny about it, nor does it trail after the "I" as an ominous double.[59] It does not even appear to *symbolise* anything: psychologising interpretations of the multiple shadows in Akhavān's poetry are therefore unlikely to have any explanatory force. Akhavān is no metaphysician nor is he concerned with the workings of the subconscious. Rather, the shadow of NĀGAH...? is there as witness in the face of the unspeakable: a pivot or enharmonic equivalent in which the "I" and the "non-I" are confounded. It is also, circuitously, a figure of time: the *other*, secondary yet vital, *embedded* time of narrative. (NĀGAH...? closes the cycle of *Az in Avestā.*)

Unmappable spaces and spaces of myth

In BĀGH-E MAN, KHAZĀNI, NĀZHU, TOLU', PEYGHĀM or SABUHI the *other* space is quarantined beyond a border that remains unnegotiable. It is a space of conjecture, bared of coordinates, a space also that will never be owned. A *uchronic* space, as it were,

[59] On the different forms the shadow has taken in – Western – art and thought since Plato see Victor Stoichita's wonderful study *A Short History of the Shadow.*

accessible only to those beings – birds – who never belong: who do not *need* to belong, as trees and humans ineluctably do.[60] Writing of boundaries as textual and topographic articulations, de Certeau calls the act of setting foot in a space "une fondation. Elle « donne espace » aux actions qu'on va entreprendre."[61] In PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH, the utopia that is the neighbour's garden will never be *given space*, no founding act of possession will be allowed to happen: the gaze – a winged, aerial being – is disembodied, detached from the "I"s corporeality, a figure of pure if futile desire. Yet, even though the longed-for object will forever remain without reach, desire is not just the ferment of a quixotic quest. As it keeps drawing the gaze towards the inappropriable, desire founds the "I" *in relation* to an Other, forging and sustaining that vital impossibility: *ān bāyadi peyvand*.[62]

While the lyric poems never depart from a stable duality of *here* and *there*, Akhavān's narrative spaces are born from the wayfarer's steps, unmapped and unmappable, mere itinerary. Great thinker of *cheminement* as an ethical praxis, de Certeau speaks of "la relation entre l'itinéraire (une série discursive d'opérations) et la carte (une mise à plat totalisant des observations)."[63] Defying totalisation, the *āsemān-e*

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[60] Marie-Madeleine Davy in her book *L'oiseau et sa symbolique* devotes several pages to the metaphorical relation of birds and space: "Par sa nature, l'oiseau est voué à l'espace. Et quel espace ? Un espace dépourvu de chemin, un au-delà des formes que l'œil pourrait discerner. […] Le dynamisme du sans-forme. Il conviendrait d'en avoir l'expérience pour en connaître la démesure. […] Impossible de s'enraciner dans l'espace, on le traverse sans laisser la moindre trace. Le sans-forme n'accepte rien de palpable, de visible. Tout se gomme. En volant, l'oiseau ne se retourne pas pour regarder le chemin parcouru. Devant lui, rien ne se découvre. Aucun obstacle ne saurait surgir. Cette absence d'obstacle se présente comme une invitation à la non-souffrance qu'apporte la libération" (Davy, 51–56).

[61] de Certeau 1990, 183.

[62] Blanchot (1955, 228) says of Orpheus: "Il perd Eurydice, parce qu'il la désire par-delà les limites mesurées du chant, et il se perd lui-même, mais ce désir et Eurydice perdue et Orphée dispersé sont nécessaires au chant, comme est nécessaire à l'œuvre l'épreuve du désœuvrement éternel."

[63] de Certeau 1990, 176.

« har-kojā » of CHĀVUSHI (1335, *Zemestān*) is a *fugitive* space, pure, that will not be captured in geometric, preordained patterns: there is no atlas of clouds. Yet, the promise of an *elsewhere* outside the laws and ambivalences of human cohabitation is fraught. Unbounded space offers no orientation or shelter, it leaves any being that dares to move through it exposed to the terror of empty skies.

Ricœur writes that "les déplacements du corps […] ne se laissent ni dire, ni penser, ni même à la limite éprouver, sans quelque référence, au moins allusive, aux point, lignes, surfaces, volumes, distances, inscrits sur un espace détaché de la référence à l'ici et au là-bas inhérents au corps propre."[64] Yet, what happens to the "I" moving – erring – through space if all signposts and coordinates are removed? Is not the "I" in smooth space reduced to a point of no extension and all movement derealised, absorbed into a nightmare of infinite dimensions?[65] Distorting what is known and familiar, the *other* space is no longer human. Any sense of dimension is shattered and the contours of reality are blurred. Language – speech – itself becomes treacherous, object of derision. In MARD-O MARKAB (1341, *Az in Avestā*) the eponymous knight and his mount keep charging towards *khandestān* ("a wilderness between Nowhere and Nusquam," as a solicitous commentator informs us) before being swallowed up by a *kos-e gandom*.[66] The reader here is left stunned by the utter incommensurability of the epic gesture with an obscene seriousness, a fake majesty of language: a more caustic parody of

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[64] Ricœur 2000, 185 (on "L'espace habité").

[65] John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* speaks of "the undistinguishable inane of infinite space."

[66] Akhavān (in Kākhi 1382, 232) says that the poem was a reaction to the charade of the Shah's White Revolution. (In the first imprint of *Az in Avestā*, the text is dated 4 to 6 Bahman, the date of the referendum to which the proposed changes were put in 1341/1963. To my knowledge, no other of Akhavān's poems is inscribed with the *day* of its composition. Also, no other poem contains as many numerical relations that seem absurd in their meticulous precision: "kuchaktarin sabr-e khodā chel sāl-o hefdah ruz tu dar tu-st.")

(pseudo-)heroism can hardly be imagined.[67] Counterpart to a speech that for brief moments appears to lapse into glossolalia is a vertigo of perspectives. The poem draws us into a space where the shelterless, ingenuous gaze is made to travel between close and far, between the paltriest and the grandest, most dizzying scale: the granary of two bourgeois mice worried about the fate of their wares and the *farākh dasht-e bi farsang* whence the saviour is rumoured to arrive. It is the same impossible perspective of a confounded "I" that underlies all of what may be called Akhavān's broken epics yet in no other poem have language and space been warped with greater virtuosity or anger.[68]

In CHĀVUSHI, the chosen path does not lead to the Olympian heights inhabited by prophets and poets but to a forsaken wasteland:

تو دانی کاین سفر هرگز بسوی آسمانها نیست.
[...]
بسوی پهندشت بی خداوندیست،
که با هر جنبش نبضم
هزاران اخترش پژمرده و پرپر بخاک افتند.

you know that this journey never leads to the skies.
[...]
it leads to a forsaken wasteland.
where with each pulse of my heart

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[67] Rezā Barāhani (in Qāsemzādeh 1370, 131) takes exception to precisely this language when he says of the poem that "ebhāmash tabdil be ta'qid shodeh'ast, zabān dar takallof-e mozāhemi oftādeh'ast." Apart from the fact that MARD-O MARKAB is hardly an obscure or ambiguous work, Barāhani – like many others, including Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 184) – fails to see that Akhavān's language here functions as *parody*: it is distorted, a ventriloquising, self-conscious copy of epic conventions. Paul Celan's words about Georg Büchner's *Leonce und Lena* are equally true of MARD-O MARKAB: "Gehuldigt wird hier der für die Gegenwart des Menschlichen zeugenden Majestät des Absurden" (Celan 1986, 3:190). • MARD-O MARKAB could with some justification be called *picaresque*, also for the outrageousness of its spatial imagery (see de Certeau 1987, 267). It is interesting to note in this context that the picaresque novel was in turn influenced by mediaeval *maqāmāt*. MARD-O MARKAB is in many ways a posthumous representative of the genre.

[68] In this respect, MARD-O MARKAB could even be called Faustian. The satirical yet at the same time existential vertigo of Akhavān's poem recalls the lines from *Mon Faust* by Paul Valéry: « Il n'est ni chaud ni froid … il n'y a ni haut, ni bas. […] Il y a énormément de rien dans le Tout. »

thousands of stars
plunge down to the earth flickering and seared.

Captured in one of Akhavān's most poignant and beautiful images, the agony of the stars plunging down with each beat of the heart is more than the metaphorical exteriorisation of suffering. What lies *outside* – outside the bounded singularity of an "I" – is not the projection of a mental state, tamed in metaphor. Rather, a dialectics of interior (subjective) and exterior (objective) spaces is played out: a parallel becoming, as if two aspects of a prismatic reality were unfolding simultaneously, in the unity of a single image. (At the end of QĀSEDAK the movement is inverted, turned inwards, as it were, to bring forth a figure of measureless pain: "abr-hāye hameh 'ālam shab-o ruz / dar delam migeryand.") Metaphor here transcends the ontological confines of the poem and becomes grafted on human time. Just as the heart keeps on beating, the calvary has no end, is renewed from pulse to pulse. Inextricable, suffering and life – owned and inalienable life, not abstract idea – cannot but be affirmed together.[69]

At the outset of CHĀVUSHI stands a cross of three roads, each holding the prospect of a different future. Yet the only *ethical* choice, already prefigured in the allegory of SAG-HĀ-O GORG-HĀ (1332, *Zemestān*), is the road that leads into the open: *rāh-e bi bar-gasht-o bi farjām*.[70] Emmanuel Levinas, reflecting on the sense of utopia in Paul Celan and the paradoxical excentricity of a movement that turns away from the human before leading back to it, asks: "Et comme si l'utopie était non pas le lot d'une maudite errance,

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[69] The description of a mortally wounded wolf in ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR evokes the same existential nexus, in a body that resonates with its own story:

با زخمه های دمبدم کای نفسهایش،
تفسانه های نوبت خود را
در ساز این میرنده تن غمناک می نالد.

[70] The theme of SAG-HĀ-O GORG-HĀ was adapted from the Hungarian revolutionary poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849).

mais la clairière où l'homme se montre […] ?"[71] It is the same question that CHĀVUSHI poses as the infinite expanse of *pahn-dasht-e bi-kerān* is folded into the smallest, most intimate space, and a voice echoes darkly in the chamber of the heart:[72]

و میپرسد، صدایش ناله ای بی نور :
ـ « کسی اینجاست ؟

and asks, its voice a lightless lament:
– « is someone there?

The accursed errancy remains an *invitation au voyage* that keeps being extended while no step is ever taken: bound for a non-space, still unrealised, the journey *cannot* take place. Instead, an incessant beginning leads back to the ever-same: "hamān sham'-o hamān najvā-st." Endpoint and origin merge as the final address of a friend – heteronomous yet resembling the "I" – issues into the silence of an answerless ellipse. In the last verses of CHĀVUSHI the trappings of legend have cleared, revealing the barest and most deeply human utopia: the utopia of an "I" interpellating an unknowable other.

Space in Akhavān's narrative poems is *haptic* or *kinetic* rather than *visual*. As if imagined by the blind, it *becomes* space only as the "I" moves through it, indissociable from this very movement and thus, also, a function of time: *ham-zād-e pā-ye ādam-e khāki*.[73] Unpredictable by its nature, itinerant space is threatening and bleak, haunted

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[71] Levinas (quoted in Ricœur 1986, 260) here refers to a passage in Celan's *Meridian* speech (see Celan 1986, 3:199). The question of ethics is central to Akhavān, from the earliest works to his last poem in modern form, MĀ, MAN, MĀ, dating from shortly before his death. After 1345, the tight weave of Akhavān's poetry gives way and something else comes to the fore. Perhaps the later poems (collected in *Seh Ketāb*) should be read – and reconsidered – as expressions of the search for "la clairière où l'homme se montre." (The reinsertion of HASTAN in *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist…,* cannot be explained by purely aesthetic criteria.)

[72] Erich Kahler (154) speaks of a "transcendence downward, inward, into an *inner beyond*" that in modern poetry, specifically in Baudelaire, replaces the existence of a higher being.

[73] "Les jeux de pas sont façonnages d'espaces. Ils trament les lieux" (de Certeau 1990, 146).

by spectral adversaries who, resembling visions or memories of a mythical past, cannot be fought let alone defeated. The heroes of legend are dead, phantom pains of the imagination. Only windmills remain and the road that still needs to be taken: "mā / fātehan-e shahr-hāye rafteh bar bād-im." CHĀVUSHI, BARF, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, MARD-O MARKAB, ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, and NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? are poems of non-belonging and alienation. As reality has shown itself meretricious and nothing is left to hold on to or trust, the errant "I" leaves, in search of a *different* existence. De Certeau writes, "marcher, c'est manquer de lieu. C'est le procès indéfini d'être absent et en quête d'un propre."[74] It is this elusive thing, *un propre*, unadulterated by compromise and hypocrisy, that awaits at the horizon of a path without return. There is no redemption, no God, no escape, only the quest for a self.

[74] de Certeau 1990, 155.

CHAPTER 4
THE DEPTH OF TIME: VOICES

Lyric poetry has been defined as the expression of subjective states of mind, sentiments and private experiences – most notably love – cast in concise form and, at least traditionally, associated with music and song. Beyond the criteria of form, lyric differs from narrative in its mode of enunciation: while the direct speech of an "I" (monophonic and subjective: *diegesis*) is the primary mode of the lyric, narrative genres rely on indirect speech and the interposition of characters between the author and his or her tale (polyphonic and objective: *mimesis*).[1] Besides, based on their respective modes of discourse, lyric and narrative can also be distinguished by the ways in which time is actualised in the poetic enunciation itself. Much of Akhavān's work no longer fits into categories of lyric (*ghazal*) or narrative while paradigms of subjectivity and traditional form have ceased to be exhaustive tools for analysis. Other analytical categories – categories of time and enunciation – are better suited to elucidate a poetry that strains beyond the tradition from which it emerges.

Narrative poetry has the *récit* as its constitutive element and thus depends on the unfolding of time, more precisely, on the double temporality that underlies every act of narration: the chronologic time of events and the time of their configuration in what is recounted. To the time of events and configured, narrative time, following Benveniste, a third time may be added: the *instant du discours*, which – as the fictional moment

[1] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1998, 271. While the question of genres has occupied philosophers and literary critics since Aristotle and, in its modern form, the Jena Romantics, the single most illuminating intervention is, to my mind, Gérard Genette's essay "Introduction à l'architexte" (in Genette 2004, 9–82).

where a lyric "I" speaks merges with the instant of reading – becomes the placeholder for a meaning that is continually renewed. In narrative, meaning cannot be finalised as there is no end and no ultimate point of convergence to the heterogeneous strands of a polyphonic structure. Unlike narrative poetry with its counterpoint of characters and voices, the lyric poem is conceived as a single moment of consciousness, excised from time, condensed, and – in its singularity – achieved. In the lyric poem, a simultaneous unfolding of phenomena is gathered to the gravitational force of an "I." Whatever happens in the poem does not, as it were, escape the "I"s angle of vision or spill over the poem's imagined frame: everything passes through the gates of a single auctorial consciousness, however doubting.

Bearing in mind this general distinction, we shall, over the following pages, consider possibilities of voice and of speaking, at first intransitively as a singular "I" and then in relation, addressing a you. From there, the "I" will join a chorus of narrative voices and take position towards the events of an age: history.

In terms of structure, the chapter is divided into three sections of roughly equal length, treating aspects of lyric and narrative in the poetry of Akhavān. Throughout the three sections, time as the medium – the structuring principle – of both perception and narrative will stay with us, as will the thought of Benveniste and Ricœur. However, the focus has shifted slightly. Different aspects of time will come to the fore as the first two sections of this chapter are indebted to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Michel de Certeau. Following these two thinkers, questions of alterity and relation, ultimately also of love will be investigated as they bear upon time and poetic speech. In the final section, the perspective will then be opened up beyond the dialogue relating two subjectivities and widened to encompass the horizon of history.

The introductory section is devoted to the broken *cogito* of Akhavān's lyric poetry, his fragile yet dignified *taghazzol* in poems like LAHZEH-YE DIDĀR, DARICHEH-HĀ or GHAZAL 3. Configurations of the "I" in time and language will be examined. Specifically, our concern will be to understand the *ego*'s loss of sovereignty and the silence that surrounds the act of poetic speech in Akhavān. Also, we shall see how an ethical relation is founded in the act of address to a "you" that remains – that *must* remain – without name.

Exploring the affinities between lyric poetry and mystical speech, the core section of the chapter seeks to shed light on what Mohammad Rezā Shafiʿi Kadkani has called Akhavān's *ghazal-mānand*.[2] These poems do not always speak of human love but still forge a relation, as words of an "I" addressed to an Other. Lyric poetry and mystical speech are both oriented towards an outside that cannot be fully known yet in the act of address becomes inscribed on the structure of language. Indeed, the question of language is crucial as one of the major challenges of Persian literature has been the quest for an autonomous modern language of love. It will therefore be illuminating to see how Akhavān in his poetry strove to find new images and words to render a contemporary social reality. Poems like LAHZEH-YE DIDĀR (1334), DARICHEH-HĀ (1335), GHAZAL 4 (1343) or GHAZAL 6 (1345) all in their different ways show aspects of a single impossibility: relating to a "you" outside the overcome social and linguistic codes of desire. Yet, the Other in Akhavān is not confined to the "you" of a lover but takes on various, unexpected guises. Our exploration will end with a look at some poems that embody what could be called a lyric mysticism: GHAZAL 3 (1336), HĀLAT, NAMĀZ and SABZ (all 1339). In these poems, the poetic word itself becomes receptive to an absolutely heterogeneous ontological order and ceases to be identifiable with a historical

[2] Shafiʿi Kadkani 1390a, 113.

trajectory. As the act of address opens the poem up to something that cannot be assimilated the mark of an absence is traced on language.

Beyond the matter of lyric poetry and *ghazal* – expression of love or mystico-philosophical speculation? – the borders of genre in Akhavān are blurred. Neither lyric nor narrative in the classical sense, poems like ZEMESTĀN (1334), KHOFTEGĀN (1337), DAR ĀN LAHZEH (1339), ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR (1341) or KATIBEH (1345) defy classification: they constitute a point of reversal or pivot in which the generic opposites are sublated. Mediating between lyric and narrative modes, these works show how Akhavān's poetry becomes – or rather, already *is* – a philosophy of history, enacted in a profoundly heteroglot language. Akhavān's narrative poems in their polyphonic scope and complexity offer the clearest exposition of this philosophy of history.

The closing section of the chapter will offer a reading of one of Akhavān's most emblematic works, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH (1336), and look at how ideas of language, perception, self and history are inflected in the poem. Our discussion will be interspersed with references to Akhavān's other narrative poems, from CHĀVUSHI (1335) and NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR / KĀVEH YĀ ESKANDAR (1335) to MIRĀS (1335), QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN (1339), ĀNGAH PAS AZ TONDAR (1339), MARD-O MARKAB (1341), ĀNGAH PAS AZ TONDAR (1339), NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? (1343) and, belatedly, KH^{W}ĀN-E HASHTOM VA ĀDAMAK 1 and 2 (1347 and 1348). This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive analysis of these works: an appreciation of Akhavān's narrative masterpieces would call for a much more extensive study. However, it *will* be possible to touch upon the specific conception of history that is exemplified in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH and, in one way or another, informs all of Akhavān's writing. Our argument throughout will be silently guided by the pioneering and still dazzlingly insightful work of Mikhail Bakhtin. We shall also draw upon the less well-known but perceptive study

The Tower and the Abyss by Erich Kahler, especially Kahler's discussion of what he calls "the experience of a fractionized world" in poetry and his diagnosis of a split from within affecting the individual in the industrialised – modern – age.[3] In addition, Käte Hamburger's study of narrative time, Theodor Adorno's magisterial essay on epic naïvety and Maurice Blanchot's meditations on the death of the epic hero will help to illuminate certain aspects of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. Our central question will be if Akhavān's poem can be read as an epic of our time. Unsettling narrative consciousness from the outset, the relay of ever more disengaged narrators creates a void at the centre of the tale and shows the failure of the heroic deed to be ineluctable. Essentially, here, the mind's failure to understand is the failure of language to account for reality: alienation becomes visible and hierarchies are broken in poetic speech. It is also in language that the quiet, subliminal materiality of history is manifested and guilt attributed to past and present alike. Yet, what remains in the end, once history – the illusion of a knowable historical truth – has been effaced? This is the question we shall set out to address in the final pages of this dissertation.

The broken cogito

A passage from Ingeborg Bachmann's *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* of 1959/60 offers what may be the most passionately lucid account of the strange kind of being – the elusive, modern "I" – that speaks in the poetry of our time:

> Aber wird von der Dichtung nicht, trotz seiner unbestimmbaren Größe, seiner unbestimmbaren Lage immer wieder das Ich hervorgebracht werden, einer neuen Lage entsprechend, mit einem Halt an einem neuen Wort? Denn es gibt keine letzte Verlautbarung. Es ist das Wunder des Ich, daß es, wo immer es spricht, lebt; es kann nicht sterben – ob es geschlagen ist oder im Zweifel, ohne

[3] Kahler 1989, 112.

> Glaubwürdigkeit und verstümmelt – *dieses Ich ohne Gewähr*! Und wenn keiner ihm glaubt, und wenn es sich selbst nicht glaubt, man muß ihm glauben, es muß sich glauben, sowie es einsetzt, sowie es zu Wort kommt, sich löst aus dem uniformen Chor, aus der schweigenden Versammlung, wer es auch sei, was es auch sei. Und es wird seinen Triumph haben, heute wie eh und je – als Platzhalter der menschlichen Stimme.[4]

It is this "I" without surety that speaks in NAMĀZ or ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, that probably speaks in all of Akhavān's works. Rising from a *now* to testify – to give voice and interpellate an Other – the "I" is both witness and imbued with the age it belongs to.[5] Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, in his *Bremen* (1958) and *Meridian* (1961) speeches, each from their own orient, sought to salvage poetry against the debris of a disfigured century. At almost the same time, Akhavān was penning the major texts of his poetics. In the preface to the second edition of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (1338/1959) Akhavān first touches upon the "I" voiced in lyric poetry. Six years later, eighteen densely written pages in the afterword to *Az in Avestā* (1344/1965) are devoted to the question of *man va maniyat*. It is a strange "I" that Akhavān sets out to locate in the verses of classical and modern poets, a peculiar "I-ness" that bears no resemblance to the exalted Cartesian *cogito* or to Nietzsche's *anti-cogito* with its dismissal of the thinking, self-identical subject as fallacious. Neither of these paradigms can elucidate Akhavān's quest for the subject of his poetry. We need to look elsewhere, to Paul Ricœur's offering of a fragile, permeable *cogito*: a *cogito brisé* that is founded not on ontological certainty or denial but comes into being in and for the moment of relation to an Other, like the transient marvel of Bachmann's "Ich ohne Gewähr."[6] A deeply relevant

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[4] Bachmann, 75 (italics added).

[5] In a talk given in 1951, Gottfried Benn (Benn, 41) says that "hinter einem modernen Gedicht stehen die Probleme der Zeit, der Kunst, der inneren Grundlagen unserer Existenz weit gedrängter und radikaler als hinter einem Roman oder gar einem Bühnenstück. Ein Gedicht ist immer die Frage nach dem Ich."

[6] Ricœur 1990, 22–27 and 368–369. See also Dosse 2012, 151–152.

figure of thought, the broken cogito will guide us through the following mediations on poetry and the *now* of a self in time.

The modernity of the speaking "I" is not anchored in any period or age but arises from a consciousness that knows of its own contingency and at the same time keeps giving voice, intransitively, reaching out. Perhaps nowhere else can the emergence of a modern, dialogic fragility be seen as clearly as in those poems that do not rely on narrative and on ideas transcending the experience of a self: history, nationhood or the fraudulence of politics. Lyric poetry is more pared down in scope, less polyphonic, as the cast of characters rarely extends beyond the two errant beings of "I" and "you." Yet, what *is* lyric poetry? Ultimately, three, maybe four questions make up its touchstone. The question of *voice* and thus of *relation*: "Wege einer Stimme zu einem wahrnehmenden Du"[7] (aborted in GOL). The question of *time*: of the unique instant which, in the act of address, becomes – keeps becoming – the gnomic present of an experience (PEYGHĀM).[8] The question, finally, of *memory*: of a *now* crossing over, transmuted, into that *other* space, lost yet still *there*, beyond the translucent screen erected by the passing of time (KHAZĀNI). It is in language that these configurations are made to happen and thereby, obliquely and fleetingly, become real.[9]

Analysing the progressive loss of I-ness experienced by the narrator in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Ricœur writes: "Le soi ici refiguré par le récit est

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[7] Celan 1986, 3:201.

[8] In the – somewhat sibylline – words of Merleau-Ponty (1976, 383): "rien n'existe, tout se temporalise." • Gadamer (1973, 148) writes of Celan's IN DEN FLÜSSEN and the modality of time operative in the poem: "das Einmalige wird zum gnomisch Gegenwärtigen."

[9] As Benveniste writes, "les événements ne sont pas le temps, il sont *dans* le temps" (Benveniste 1974, 70).

en réalité confronté à l'hypothèse de son propre neánt."[10] Musil's novel to be sure is a paradigm of European modernism, and the legitimacy of conceptualising Persian literature in terms of modernity – or anti-modernity, at that – is far from evident. (Such conceptualisations are problematic also because they are bound to encourage ideological judgements.)[11] However, irrespective of any real or imagined Western lineage, the fact of a strangely endangered, counter-classical self remains undeniable in Akhavān. A process of dissolution is at work in his writings that resembles the vertigo habitually associated with modernity: poems like SABZ, HĀLAT or NAMĀZ describe the experience of an "I" on the verge of being undone, sensing the pull of empty space. Unlike anything that preceded them or was composed at the time in Iran, these poems recall the ego's loss of sovereignty that is set forth in Georges Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure* as a mysticism without God. Like Bataille, Akhavān kept writing about experiences that fundamentally defy words. In his lyric poems, speech itself is the only respite that staves off the threat of an "I" becoming unravelled.

No other contemporary poet articulates to the same degree the act of poetic speech itself, in all its different tonalities: *sorud*, *naghmeh*, *zemzemeh* or *najvā* are so

[10] Ricœur 1990, 196.

[11] However, if we define modernity with Gianni Vattimo (1991, 99) as "that era in which being modern becomes a value, or rather, it becomes *the* fundamental value to which all other values refer" then the very question of whether or not a work of literature can be called "modern" indicates that modernity has already been entered.

many ways of naming what poetry *does*.[12] Yet, facing the multitude of discourses and tongues lies an ever-present, dark abyss of silence. Perhaps *khāmushi* – a state of eclipse – is the original ground of Akhavān's poetry: the silence that meets the ever-same anguished question, repeated, tonelessly, in CHĀVUSHI; the echo that in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN empties all voices into the senseless shell of a question without answer; the tautologically redoubled silence in BARF, where a grief without words or horizon is muffled in expanses of snow: "va sokut-e sāket-e ārām, / ke gham-āvar bud-o bi farjām"; the *un*saying of birdsong in KHAZĀNI; the silent procession of spirits conjured up by the ashik's tale in ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR (1341, *Az in Avestā*): an image whose wordless charge remains haunting;[13] the radio antenna on the neighbour's roof in DAR ĀN LAHZEH (1339, *Az in Avestā*), where strands of voices intersect beneath the threshold of audibility, of existence even: snippets of life imagined; the stillness that is connate with rapture and oblivion in JARĀHAT, HĀLAT and NAMĀZ, as the *parousia* of something ineffable, without weight or substance: "na sedā'i joz sedā-ye rāz-hāye shab"; the unspoken, silent bond – "gāh niz ān bāyadi peyvand k-u migoft; khāmushi-st" – in PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH; and the silence into which GHAZAL 3 fades: a silence that is the glimmering light, snuffed out, of a relation.

There is a sense of space to these silences, a space where the absence of any voice, of any sign of humanity deepens the enveloping darkness: as the gaze is

[12] Shafi'i Kadkani (1390b, 275–276) notes that, in the wake of translations from European languages (English, in this case, having replaced French as model), poets such as above all Ahmad Shāmlu began to speak of writing poetry (*she'r neveshtan*) instead of singing or declaiming poetry (*she'r goftan* or "rhapsodising": *she'r sorudan*). Naturally, these two paradigms have far-reaching implications for the way poetry – and the poet – are conceived, in either post-Romantic or epic and courtly terms. In Europe, Michel de Certeau (1987, 167–168) locates the passage from the oral to the scriptural paradigm in the 16th and 17th centuries. Interestingly, he also traces the German *dichten* back to the Latin *dictare*, of which he notes: "c'est parler une écriture, d'abord composer une lettre, mais aussi écrire de la poésie" – a remnant, thus, of orality.

[13] On the poem's background, shared with HASTAN, see footnote 23, chapter 3.

extinguished, the "I" is thrown back on itself, or rather, the borders to the outside are blurred and the self is drawn to an abyssal depth where all possibility of relation is muffled (ANDUH). Here, both voice and "I" – born and sustained in the moment of speech – exist "à la limite de l'effacement."[14] Scattered sounds weave through the darkness, creating an almost tangible space, as in QESSEH'I AZ SHAB (1334, *Zemestān*), where the howls of a dog traverse the night, or in VEDĀ' (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), where the nocturnal hush pursues a pack of stray dogs vanishing into the distance. At the same time, the poems themselves are embedded in another, more radical silence: an absence, absolute, of sound from which the voice of an "I" keeps rising. In KATIBEH (1340, *Az in Avestā*), one of Akhavān's most hermetic works, the dialectics of speech and silence is evoked with paradoxical clarity. Beyond the political allegories that have been read into it, KATIBEH is a text about poetry itself: about the immanence of meaning in the act of giving voice. At the end of the poem, the jaded assembly of prisoners (bound in chains, fettered by whom? for what kind of crime?) is left with nothing but an inscription, the same and different with each turn of the rock, while the "I" – origin if there ever was – has disappeared, eclipsed into a word spoken by no-one: « kasi rāz-e ma-rā dānad / ke az in-ru be ān-ru-yam begardānad. »[15]

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[14] Blanchot 1969, 482.

[15] Akhavān's voice recordings are the practical application of his poetics. In his reading, the engimatic word of KATIBEH becomes the toneless utterance of a disembodied, inhuman voice. (On the poem's inspiration by an Arabic parable see Shafi'i Kadkani 1390b, 511; also see Barāhani 1369, 82.) Asked about his journey to Europe in 1990 and the matter of having had to read the same poems time and again, Akhavān says: "man sa'y mikardam jur be jur bekh^{w}ānam" (quoted in Kākhi 1382, 483). Gadamer (1973, 35) writes of the significance of line breaks in Celan's poetry: "Man muß das Gedicht in seinem Zeilenbruch nicht nur genau lesen, man muß es auch so hören." Put differently, a poem's image on the page transcribes an auditory structure. Akhavān too is acutely aware of the potential inherent in the poetic line to guide what Walter Benjamin calls the movement of thought: *Denkbewegung*.

In perfect, ineluctable symmetry, the ruin of the "I" haunts the "you" it addresses. The enigmatic address of a *Hörstdu* in NAMĀZ, the invocation of an echo in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, the interpellation in SORUD-E PANĀHANDEH (1334, *Arghanun*, reprinted in the second edition of *Zemestān*) of an unknown, redemptive Other who forever fails to respond – fails to respond as an equal "you" – mirror the fragility of the speaking "I."[16] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes in *La poésie comme expérience*: "Parler à l'autre – être ou chose – , s'adresser à lui, c'est laisser advenir ce qui parle en lui ; [...] . Se disposer, extatiquement, à la « présence » de l'autre en soi : laisser s'ouvrir l'intimité."[17] In Akhavān's poetry, the Other remains the spectre of an impossible presence, as the *no-longer-there* of GHAZAL 3 and DARICHEH-HĀ, the *not-yet-there* of LAHZEH-YE DIDĀR, or the spirit of the neighbour's garden – mere figment of desire – in PEYVAND-HĀ-O BĀGH. Yet, while an unbridgeable ontological distance becomes manifest in the act of address, something else is brought into being: an ethical relation. No other poet writing in Persian has thought as keenly as Akhavān about the *pol-e larzandeh* traced between two subjectivities, no poetry has in the same way been wrought from the existential fragility of a voice sent out towards its Other, however illusory: « karak jān! bandeh-ye dam bāsh… » (ĀVĀZ-E KARAK, 1335, *Zemestān*).

What makes Akhavān so pertinent to our time and sets him apart from most of his contemporaries is the fact that in his poems, the modern "I" emerges in all its contingency. Akhavān's modernity lies here, rather than in the formal aspects of his œuvre: lexis and structure, rhyme and metre will always remain fallible criteria of

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[16] "Le moi responsable d'autrui, moi sans moi, est la fragilité même, au point d'être mis en question de part en part en tant que je, sans identité, responsable de celui à qui il ne peut donner de réponse, répondant qui n'est pas question, question qui se rapport à autrui sans non plus attendre de lui une réponse. L'Autre ne répond pas" (Blanchot 1980, 183).

[17] Lacoue-Labarthe 2004, 95.

progressiveness. It is certainly true that in their allegiance to a modern aesthetics, many works produced by the literary vanguard in the 1330s and 1340s seem far more radical than QĀSEDAK, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH or GHAZAL 3. However, for reasons that are, among other factors, related to prevalent ideas about *engagé* writing[18] and a somewhat lopsided reception of Western literature, Persian New Poetry is not at ease with its own mission. There is a subtle, almost imperceptible incongruence of form and voice, as a classical understanding of human subjectivity is expressed in poetic structures that consciously seek to be modern. Thus, Ahmad Shāmlu, committed to the necessity of rhetoric, speaks with a steadfast, occasionally fierce certitude, while the "I" voiced in the poems of Forugh Farrokhzād is wounded, yes, but not broken or threatened. Nimā, at last, appears oddly elusive, a mere *persona* of poetic abstraction, even where the itinerant pronoun sounds most assured.[19] In post-constitutional Persian literature, only the works of Sādeq Hedāyat show the same precariousness of being and relation that is sustained in Akhavān's poems. (RU-YE JĀDDEH-YE NAMNĀK, 1340, *Az in Avestā*, is dedicated to the memory of Hedāyat.)

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[18] An instance of the latter is Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's review of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (in Qāsemzādeh, 91–93). Āl-e Ahmad believes that the preface to the cycle "hanuz āsāri az mafhum-e kohneh-ye shā'eri rā dar bar dārad" and says that Akhavān's ironically playful language suggests a lack of courage ("qellat-e shojā'at"): an accusation that is plainly absurd. (See footnote 20, chapter 3.) Akhavān's refusal – "mā hamisheh bar solteh budeh'im, na bā solteh" – to submit to the request from on high is a quiet act of courage: a courage that is never shouted from the rooftops yet whose consequences had to be born.) Remarkable for its critical limitation, Āl-e Ahmad's judgement betrays an understanding of literature that harkens back to the days of the Constitutional Revolution. The categories of Akhavān's writing are different.

[19] Nimā shirks answerability to the « Qui suis-je ? » on which, according to Ricœur (2000, 193–198), an ethical relation can be founded. Interesting in this connection is the episode of Akhavān's first arrest (told, allusively, in Kākhi 1382, 312–315; also see Qahramān, 86–92, where Akhavān recounts his prison experiences of 1332 and 1333). • Michael Hamburger (94) speaks of an "objective correlative" that separates the empirical from the poetic self in some modernist poetry, creating the effect of a mask.

Any work of literature is necessarily located in a force field of self and other that gives rise to questions of structure and ethics. At the outset of his remarks on "I and I-ness" in the afterword to *Az in Avestā*, Akhavān suggests that the existential incertitude of the speaking subject is mirrored on the side of the "you": "be yek hesāb dorost dar noqteh-ye moqābel-e in mas'aleh-ye « man va maniyat » dar she'r-o adab, mas'aleh-ye mokhātab […] niz matrah ast."[20] For Akhavān, the place of the addressee must remain empty – innominate – in all poetry that is not beholden to any authority except writing itself: here for him lies the *categorial* difference between Manuchehri and Khayyām, between courtly poet and *rend*.[21] Such a distinction does not invalidate the judgement of literature on purely formal terms but rather inscribes something imponderable yet real – an ethics – on the text itself. Another witness of the crooked *saeculum*, Osip Mandelstam and, in his salutation, Celan, would speak of poetry as *Flaschenpost*, addressed to a reality – a "you" – whose existence remains uncertain.[22] Akhavān himself, in the same way as Mandelstam or Celan, never pruned his texts to serve an audience or end. And perhaps the voices that speak in his poems, precisely because some of them do not belong to a cognisant "I" but have a non-human, feral origin, are

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[20] *Az in Avestā*, 114.

[21] *Az in Avestā*, 111. In a short interview from 1358, roughly the time of his last prison poems, Akhavān says: "agar khub negāh konim, hameh gāh mā bā do no' adabiyāt dar in sar-zamin ru-be-ru hastim, yeki adabiyāt-e taslim-o setāyesh-o digari adabiyāt-e moqāvemat-o puyā" (quoted in Kākhi 1382, 230). Remarkably here no line is drawn between "modern" and "classical" writing. Instead, literature for Akhavān is defined across history by the position it takes towards hegemonic power, understood in the Gramscian sense. Categories of progress – modernity or obsolescence – are thus subverted. • Akhavān's notion of *rend* would warrant a separate study. Mortezā Kākhi in his beautiful essay "Rendi az Tabār-e Khayyām" (in Kākhi 1378, 391–395) sets forth the consequences *rendi* had for a life. Akhavān himself touches on *rendi* repeatedly, so in the preface to *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram* (17–18). • In "Zendegi-o She'r-e Akhavān Sāles az Zabān-o Qalam-e Kh^{w}odash," 57, Akhavān speaks of the artist as "mardi ke nemikh^{w}āhad joz be āstāneh-ye honar be hich āstāneh'i sar forud āvarad."

[22] See Celan 1986, 3:186.

indices of a speech unrestricted by thoughts of purpose: the dandelion's trajectory cannot be governed. (A dissemination…)

La parole scindée

There is a profound affinity between the discourse enacted in Akhavān's poems and the speech of the mystics: both the mystic fable and lyric poetry bear the mark of an absence. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Akhavān never turned to mysticism as a school of thought. However, he was keenly aware of the vulnerability of an "I" that comes to language in search of an Other. Halfway through his meditations on "I and I-ness" in the afterword to *Az in Avestā*, Akhavān remarks that "we are gradually approaching the worlds of the mystics" and asks, "what are *ego* and *self*, why is it that the mystics insist on the negation of I-ness?"[23] Indeed, why does all mysticism revolve around the denial of a personal subjectivity? And, why does the asymptotic desire for a non-self keep engendering words? The exorbitance of the "I" in the outrageous, sometimes delirious utterances of the mystics – *shathiyāt* – resembles the excess of a

[23] When Akhavān (*Az in Avestā*, 117) writes that, "kam-kam be 'avālem-e sufiyān nazdik shodeh'im" and, "*man* va *nafs* chi-st, esrār-e sufiyān dar nafy-e maniyat cherā-st?" we are faced with the difficulty of defining the terms *man* and *nafs* within a philosophical system. My translation as *ego* and *self* here is based on the specific trajectory of Akhavān's argument. • Dāryush Āshuri (in Qāsemzādeh, 176–178) rightly perceives that Akhavān's search for a *different* "I" to speak in poetry is the foundation of his ethics. I disagree with Āshuri's conclusion that "gereftari-ye in soluk-e ma'navi in ast ke Akhavān vaqti az chāleh-ye « man »-e gham-zadeh va hasrat-keshideh-ye kh^{w}ish dar miāyad tā be āfāqi mota'ālitari parvāz konad, dar chāhi sahmgintar mioftad-o ān chāh-e « mā »st" – according to Āshuri, the nationalist pitfall of an unadulterated Iranian "we." Such an interpretation fatally overlooks the teasing irony and tonal refractions – retractions – that pervade Akhavān's writings.

poetic word that can no longer be fully grasped and identified with a tradition.[24] A sense of inscrutability surrounds these utterances, a difference that does not fade with the passing of years and defies assimilation to a historical etiology. At the same time, in and through language something happens to the speaking subject: in the interstices of saying and unsaying, the "I" becomes permeable to what lies beyond the enclosure of its fictional sovereignty. (God, the beloved, a basilisk?) At times, the non-self is an eclipse of language, *khāmushi*, folding back on the mystical and poetic word: "des effets d'un silence dans le langage qui l'a prévenu (toujours le langage vient avant ce qui s'y dit)."[25] Then again, the outside may be an interpellated "you," known or unknown, always other.

Mystical speech and poetry belong to the *arts de faire*, they enact, in their very structure, a fiction of orality in which the self cannot remain isolated, closed off from the "you." (This is also where poetry turns into something that passes beyond the fictional order.) In the lyric poem much the same as in the *shath* of the mystics, the "I" ceases to be mere placeholder of a subjectivity and becomes the locus – itinerant possibility – of an encounter. Inchoation of dialogue rather than mirror image, the "you" meanwhile must remain *wholly* other, a referent that keeps receding beyond the bowshot of

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[24] Interestingly, Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 240) speaks of "shā'erān-e shath": a designation that testifies to a fundamental, *categorial* shift from a conception of mystical writing as expression of faith (or unfaith, at that) to an approach that considers these same writings as literature. The mystical here becomes a mode of discourse. Fritz Meier (483) calls *shath* "das blasfemische zungenreden": blasphemous glossolalia. In general, the ecstatic sayings of the Sufis (Bāyazid Bastāmi, Mansur al-Hallāj, 'Ayn al-Qozāt, Ruzbehān Baqli and others) only escape charges of blasphemy if they are taken to originate in the Godhead, who speaks through the emptied "I" of the mystic. Literal – legalistic – interpretations put the Sufis and their *shathiyāt* in fatal conflict with the Islamic authorities.

[25] de Certeau 1982, 258.

language.[26] The radical dissymmetry inherent in the relation is a safeguard against charges of blasphemy but also, in worldly rather than metaphysical terms, the foundation of an ethics. Just as the shadow in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? cannot be made to merge with the "I" so, too, the Other in Akhavān's lyric poems is never reduced to a mirror image, never assimilated and caged in the prison-space of a pseudo-identity.[27] The dandelion seed of QĀSEDAK, the beloved of GHAZAL 3 and the verdant, rapturing poison of SABZ are as irreducible to the categories of self as the uncertain God addressed in HASTAN. At the same time, however, the address in these poems of an inappropriable "you" is a call – without expectation of any return – on the Other to answer and become answerable as an "I": thus, MĀR-E QAHQAHEH is no mere *j'accuse* or indictment.[28] It is also an invitation, illusory and quixotic perhaps, to a "you" not to revoke the fragile bond of relation.

Akhavān's poetry is shot through with references to a state of oblivious drunkenness (*masti*), a drunkenness that troubles both spiritual aspirations and the will to drown pain and forget, if in the vaults of a tavern (DAR MEYKADEH) or the embrace of a lover (HAR JĀ DELAM BEKH^{W}ĀHAD). What then does *masti* mean, where does it belong? Most essentially, it is a cipher for the absence of a sovereign, deliberating Cartesian subject and denotes a state of heightened existence: "mastim-o dānim hastim" in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? is no gratuitous pun, playing with rhyme, existence and

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[26] This is the principal reservation Ricœur (2000, 388) brings to the ethics of Levinas: "l'extériorité de l'Autre ne peut plus désormais être exprimée dans le langage de la relation. L'Autre s'absout de la relation […] ."

[27] Levinas (1991, 178) speaks of "l'étrangeté absolue de l'altérité inassumable, réfractaire à son assimilation à la présence."

[28] In the figure of the basilisk, Akhavān addresses a popular leader of the time. (May he remain unnamed here too.) The poem itself is not dated and was published outside of the major collections, in the anthology *Sar-e Kuh-e Boland*. Akhavān explains in a footnote that the poem was probably composed between 1332 and the early 1340s. I believe that a later date of creation – perhaps around 1341 – is most likely.

attribution.[29] Rather, the juxtaposition of drunkenness and cognisance of being points to an understanding of language, time and experience as profoundly interconnected. In mystical speech as in poetry the word is embodied, material, hypostasis. Having entered time – *human* time – the word also becomes vulnerable to a meaning that is itself on the verge of impossibility, to be glimpsed only as it flashes past: de Certeau writes, "l'énonçable continue d'être blessé par un indicible."[30] No longer enclosed in a timeless system, language opens up to the *now* of the enunciation with all its physical, circumstantial details and thereby places the speaking subject in a space of relation.[31] Light (moonlight suffusing a scene, stars radiating and exiled), distances (from the ineffably close, tiny leaf of a walnut tree to the sublime dome of the night), sounds (of the night's secrets and of cicadas) and gestures (the "I" rising to make ablutions, accompanied by a bunch of imponderables, or an apple thrown up in the air, turning there as if time had slowed down) all make up a moment that is both evanescent and real. In Akhavān's lyric poems, more distinctly than anywhere else, there is a limpid and fragile, concrete immediacy to space itself, as if the speaking "I" knew that experience,

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[29] The verb *hastan* is used to express both existence and, emphatically, predication. Thus, "mastim-o dānim hastim" can be read as "we are drunk and know that we are (=exist)" but could also be understood as a declaration that the "we" is aware of being drunk. Akhavān of course plays with the two simultaneous possibilities of meaning. In DAR MEYKADEH (1333, *Zemestān*) the rhyme unmistakably conjoins existence – presence or *thereness* – and inebriation: "dar meykadeh'am; chu man basi injā hast / […] / aknun guyam ke nistam bi-kh^{w}od-o mast." • Interestingly, ZEMESTĀN (1334, *Zemestān*), whose tavern and Armenian tavern keeper are symbols that reach back into the depths of Persian literary history, is one of Akhavān's most disillusioned, realistic poems. Rather than figuring a drunken transcendence of self, *Zemestān* reverses the threefold affirmation of "manam, man" into a curse of creation: "doshnām-e past-e āfarinesh." Akhavān is exceptional in that his poetry knows both bleak, unflinching sobriety and oblivious, lucid rapture.

[30] According to de Certeau (1982, 106), the mystics in their language sought to create spaces of relation, "en comprenant dans ce langage ses aspects corporels (gestuels, sensoriels) ou circonstanciels (temps, lieux, lumières, sons, positions, situations d'interlocution ou d'« oraison »)."

[31] de Certeau 1982, 226. See also Derrida 2006, 58–59.

suspended between two acts of perception, cannot last: "bargaki kandam / az nahāl-e gerdu-ye nazdik; / va negāham rafteh tā bas dur" (NAMĀZ). The "I" here is a porous anchorage of time, stance and counter-stance, unempty, "das stehende und widerstehende Selbst, das « Ich » bin und worin die Zeit ist."[32] Neither absence nor loss of self, *masti* in Akhavān bridges the abyss between impersonal time and the moment of experience. It is the lucid and absolute presence to an outside of which nothing can be known in advance. A state of receptivity, unconditional, true and fickle, as evoked by the first lines of HĀLAT (1339, *Az in Avestā*):

آفاق پوشیده از فر بیخویشی ست و نوازش،
ای لحظه های گریزان صفای شما باد.
دمتان و ناز قدمتان گرامی، سلام ! اندر آئید.
این شهر خاموش در دوردست فراموش،
جاوید جای شما باد.

the horizons are clothed in the halo of selflessness and caress
oh you fleeting moments, be welcomed.
cherished your breath and your dear steps, salute! enter.
let this silent city forlorn in the distance
be your home for eternity.

Prefacing the second edition of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*, Akhavān writes, not without a measure of defiance:

غزل من همانقدر بشما مربوط است که شکایت من از روزگار و فرزندان روزگار. غزل من همانقدر بشما مربوط است که تأسف من و مرثیه خواندنم بر درختها و آشیانه هائی که یک توفان بیرحم تابستانی لت و پارشان کرده [...] . غزل من همانقدر بشما مربوط است که این شعف غرور آمیزم که وقتی کبوتر ها [...] اوج گرفتند، دیگر پائین نمیآیند. [...] خلاصه اینکه غزل من همانقدر بشما مربوط است که باقی حرفها [...] .

My *ghazal* concerns you just as much as my complaint about our time and its children. My *ghazal* concerns you just as much as my grief and lament [...] . My *ghazal* concerns you just as much as this proud joy I feel when the doves [...] have soared and will not come down again [...] . In short, my *ghazal* concerns you just as much as everything else I say [...] .[33]

[32] Gadamer 1973, 49.

[33] *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*, 13–14.

Akhavān here refuses to acknowledge any dichotomy – and implied valuation – that draws a line between political or committed literature and the supposedly private sentiments expressed in lyric poetry. Later, in the afterword to *Az in Avestā*, Akhavān ends the pages on "I and I-ness" with observations on the *ghazal*. There, he accords lyric poetry a universality that transcends both the moment of the poem's emergence and the boundedness of the "I" at its origin. However, he also notes that "very few of our lyric poets have been able to bring their own "I" close to the "I" of others" and adds that "I take pleasure in these words and experiences if in a corner of that *ghazal* I see one of my own moments reflected."[34] These remarks are, in equal measure, diagnosis and postulate. For Akhavān, *taghazzol* must not remain co-extensive with personal sensibilities but evolve into a locus of human experience, at once singular and universal. In other words, the "I" needs to open up to the outside and become "la place in-finie et inassurée du « je »."[35] On such grounds too the foundation of a historicity can be thought in which the "I" is no longer an arbitrary phenomenon, cloistered within the futile sufferings of a personal subjectivity but a diaphanous, fragile prism, shot through with time: a "cross-territory of history."[36] It is this "I" – both origin and transcendence of self – that addresses a "you" in a specific historical constellation, observing as much as breaking existent codes of desire.

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[34] Akhavān (*Az in Avestā*, 126 and 128) writes, "dar ghazal-guyān-e mā besyār kamand kasāni ke tavānesteh'and man-e khʷod rā be man-e digarān nazdik konand" and "dar surati man az in ahvāl-o aqvāl lezzat mibaram ke man niz gusheh'i az ān ghazal rā ā'ineh-ye lahzeh'i az lahazāt-e khʷod bebinam." Akhavān's choice of words here is informed by mystical concepts: *hāl* and *lahzeh* are rooted in a specific philosophy of experience and time (the *now* of a moment).

[35] de Certeau 1982, 245.

[36] Wolosky, 143. • In his famous theses on the philosophy of history Walter Benjamin (1:701) writes: "Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet." The same could be said of the "I," which, rather than a vestibule of homogeneous, empty time, is a space permeated by *now*.

How can love be carried over into language, how can its reality enter the poem and there, in its own way, become real? How can a "you" be addressed in images that have not over decades and centuries become fatally shopworn, losing their power to touch and refigure reality?[37] In one of his earliest and most comprehensive essays on Akhavān's poetics, Shafiʿi Kadkani devotes some highly relevant pages to *noʿi ghazal va ta'ammolāt-e falsafi.* He reviews the state of lyric poetry in Iran after Nimā and concludes that a gratuitous, self-absorbed eroticism has become prevalent while no expression has yet been found for a contemporary portrayal of love in all its human aspects: "it is the disgrace of our contemporary *ghazal* that it has so far been unable to reflect a stage in the development of our social life."[38] Certainly, this statement is sweeping and bold. Also, it is significant to note that Forugh Farrokhzād's TAVALLODI DIGAR appeared in the same year – 1342 – as Shafiʿi Kadkani's text: a more authentic model of contemporary lyricism than Forugh's poem could hardly be imagined.[39]

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[37] de Certeau (2005, 336) writes that mystical language cannot be understood in its syntactic and lexical aspects only, "c'est-à-dire la combinaison d'entrées et de fermetures qui détermine les possibilités de comprendre, mais aussi les codes de reconnaissance, l'organisation de l'imaginaire, les hiérarchisations sensorielles […] , la constellation fixe des institutions ou des références doctrinales, etc." In the search for a modern *taghazzol*, it is precisely the traditional poetic codes of recognition and structures of the lyric imaginary that offer the greatest resistance.

[38] Shafiʿi Kadkani (1390a, 150–151) writes: "in rosvā'i-ye ghazal-e moʿāser-e fārsi-st ke hanuz natavānesteh yek qadam az tahavvolāt-e zendegi-ye ejtemāʿi-e mā rā dar khʷish monʿakes konad." • According to a widely held view (echoed in Mohammadi Āmoli 1380, 217) Akhavān was able offer a genuinely new way of expression for human love in no more than two or three of his poems. The fact itself is not controversial. However, it must not be forgotten that Akhavān was writing in a society where affective relations were (and still are) subject to highly codified restrictions and extramarital affairs – alleged or not – could be used as a pretext for sending someone to jail. Creating valid, authentic, non-scripted images of love under such circumstances is a task that all but exceeds the resources of poetry.

[39] Akhavān greatly esteemed Forugh Farrokhzād and it may be no coincidence that his only elegies for the death of fellow writers were composed in honour of Forugh (DARIGH-O DARD, 1345, *Dar Hayāt-e Kuchak-e Pā'iz, dar Zendān*) and Sādeq Hedāyat (RU-YE JĀDDEH-YE NAMNĀK, 1345, *Az in Avestā*). (See also Qahramān, 65.)

However, it remains true that the quest for an autonomous modern language of love in Iran was blighted by unease and perplexity. Akhavān himself struggled to propose a new *discours amoureux* beyond the intellectual dualism that kept pitching the codified relational structures of the classical *ghazal* against the ideological – moral? – limitations of what Shafiʿi Kadkani calls *sheʿr-e bastari.*[40] Symptomatic of this struggle is a strange undecidedness of metaphor, a wavering between classical similes and audaciously modern images that appears to be most acute in Akhavān's love poems: GHAZAL 1 (1335, *Zemestān*) and GHAZAL 4 (1343, *Az in Avestā*) are examples of a poetry that is deeply ambivalent about its origins. In the first stanza of GHAZAL 4 a space is erected that keeps folding back on itself:

چون پرده حریر بلندی
خوابیده مخمل شب، تاریک مثل شب
آیینه سیاهش چون آینه عمیق
سقف رفیع گنبد بشکوهش
لبریز از خموشی، وز خویش لب بلب.

like a tall silken veil
the night's velvet, dark as the night, smoothly dormant,
its black mirror like a deep mirror
the lofty height of its sublime dome
overflowing with silence, and brimming of self.[41]

We are faced here with an odd circularity of description, enacted by a tautological phrase without finite verb. No "(there) is" anchors the image in time, placing it in relation to us. Instead, the classical similes are unsettled by tautological doublings that lack any meaning or sense: the night is likened to itself, feeds off its own qualities. It almost seems as if the literal (concrete: veil, velvet, mirror) and metaphorical (abstract: night, darkness, depth) planes were cancelling each other out. Depth is no independent

[40] Shafiʿi Kadkani 1390a, 151.

[41] The word *khʷish* could with equal validity be translated as "self" and "itself." I have chosen "self" as I believe that the first stanza of GHAZAL 4 is fundamentally about self and the absence of self, much in the same way as HĀLAT, NAMĀZ or SABZ.

reality but the fallacious, unreal depth emerging from the material existence of a mirror, while the night exceeds itself in a paradoxical movement resembling the mechanism of the Derridean supplement. There is no "I," no time, only a night that emanates without origin: any trace of individual, subjective humanity has been expunged from this nocturnal space that seems categorically detached, unrelated to the night of *makhmal-e zolf-e najib-e to* evoked in the poem's second stanza.[42] Here, the similes have been tamed and, as comparisons, have lost their outrageous tautologicalness. At the same time, the boundless nocturnal space is collapsed into the figure of a curled up cat caressed by the poet while the planets are humanised – conventionalised also – as tutelary spirits of love.[43] The smallness of human love has been salvaged from the crushing sublimity of a night that is absolutely autarkic. Or so it appears.

Akhavān's first love poems outside the classical *ghazal* form, YĀD (1330, the poem that opens *Zemestān*, programmatically on a note of remembrance: "hargez farāmusham nakh^{w}āhad gasht, hargez") and HAR JĀ DELAM BEKH^{W}ĀHAD (1333), are still full of a daring, youthful insouciance and a simplicity, almost naïveness of expression before something changes, becomes fragmented. The lightness of being can no longer be maintained in language once the mirror's luminous surface has shattered. Yet also, beyond the faltering of poetic language and imagery, a voice – the *possibility* of a voice – appears to have been interrupted: the song of *karak* keeps being halted, cut up into

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[42] The second stanza of GHAZAL 4 also contains the infamous line "man nāz mikonam" whose "man" Shafiʿi Kadkani (1390a, 182) once called a redundant metrical filler (*hashv-e qabih*) – much to Akhavān's chagrin. Yet, not only metre here is incongruous but also the ontological spaces of night and human love. The "I" itself is redundant.

[43] What happens between the first and second stanzas of GHAZAL 4 bears resemblance to what Meister Eckhart calls the *Enthöhung* ("unheightening") of God: a collapse of the ungraspable sublime into the immanence of creation, of man. Celan takes up this idea in TRECKSCHUTENZEIT, where an unheightened god comes to speech in the human world, mortal, beneath the sphere of the stars: "der Enthöhte, geinnigt, / spricht unter den Stirnen, am Ufer."

syntactic set pieces, before it resumes again, pointlessly, speaking of a truth that cannot be grasped as what it is but only as the smell of burnt wings.[44] In the five years that separate YĀD from ĀVĀZ-E KARAK, CHĀVUSHI, HASTAN or BĀGH-E MAN, the last poems of *Zemestān*, Akhavān's poetry not only makes the final transition from the semi-classical *chārpāreh*[45] to the freer, contingent forms proposed by Nimā, it also loses the artless candour of an "I" that believes in the innocence and impunity of the poetic word.[46]

LAHZEH-YE DIDĀR (1334, *Zemestān*), DARICHEH-HĀ (1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), and GHAZAL 3 (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) are among the most beautiful expressions of love in modern poetry.[47] No longer naïve, these poems are nevertheless remarkable for the unadorned simplicity of their language. In LAHZEH-YE DIDĀR and DARICHEH-HĀ, there is no presence of a beloved but only a sense of loss or protension, seemingly belied by a shyness to name suffering: "nefrin be safar, ke harcheh kard u kard." At the same time, all description – of a body, a face – is withheld, as if the beloved had not so much

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[44] In AZ DORUGH-E ZESHT-O MASHHUR-E BOZORGI, NĀMASH: ĀZĀDI (*Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist*) the anodyne and complacent advice offered to the captive bird in ĀVĀZ-E KARAK is invoked again, with bitterness: "va tasallā-ye dorughini, / az qabil-e « del be gham maspār. »"

[45] The *chārpāreh* (or *chahārpāreh*) may be considered a variation on the classical form (*qāleb*) of the *dobeyti*. Popularised at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, the *chārpāreh* is semi-classical in that it offers certain liberties of rhyme while retaining the classical principles of *beyt* (as a symmetrical structure composed of two *mesrā'*) and *'aruz*.

[46] Akhavān's second imprisonment at prison "M" in the winter of 1333 constitutes a turning point: the poems FARĀMUSH and FARYĀD are testimony to this existential and literary crisis that was marked by an intense engagement with Nimā's poetics. • Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 122–123) makes some partisan and impassioned observations contrasting a voguish "gham-e mobham" displayed by some of Akhavān's contemporaries with the genuine despair brought forth by prison experiences, torture and the precariousness of an existence responsible for – and answerable to – others, as alluded to in PEYGHĀM (1336, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*): "yād-e ranj az dast-hāye montazer bordan."

[47] A first version of GHAZAL 3 can be seen in Akhavān's – dazzling – letter to Hoseyn Rāzi (Qahramān, 170–172) dated 7 / Farvardin / 37, where the poem is still called PEYGHĀM.

transcended physicality to enter the realm of abstract and interchangeable ideas but – as in GHAZAL 3 – become a phenomenon of nature, a topography of the mind and of existence: "ey shatt-e shirin-e por showkat-e man!" The "you" addressed here is singular and strangely immediate, *there* even in its absence, as the eclipse of sun and stars, perpetuated, dragging on. Elsewhere, later, the Other appears as a phantom, a nocturnal spectre that does not exist, is not yet or no longer *allowed* to exist, as in GHAZAL 6 (1345, *Dar Hayāt-e Kuchak-e Pā'iz, dar Zendān*), which cannot be understood – understood in the profundity of what its leaves unsaid – without knowledge of the events that led to Akhavān's third imprisonment.[48]

Something strange happens in Akhavān's poetry as the Other is inscribed in the very structure of the address and thereby becomes a temporal presence, renewed with each act of speech. Michel de Certeau writes of the mystical word, paradox of a reference that cannot be moored:

> Le mot ne peut être que *deux*. Il est déja scindé. Ce pluriel inhérent à l'unité élémentaire de signification est la marque d'un sens « mystique » que le langage ne prend ou ne reçoit plus dans ses filets, et qui le recompose à partir d'une « blessure », en fonction d'une disjonction fondamentale du mot et de la chose.[49]

It is this split word, cracked open, this *parole scindée* that we hear in Akhavān, whether a lost, oblivious love is addressed: "ey yād-e man ze del bordeh!" (DARIGH, 1335, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), or the immaterial *thereness* of an unnamed yet certain future: "ey nadānam chun-o chand! ey dur!" (MANZELI DAR DUR-DAST). In these apostrophes, a linguistic oddity – a defect? – wrests the utterance from the timeless structure of

[48] The poems entitled GHAZAL 6, 7 and 8 were written in the winter of 1345, at Qasr prison in Tehran. On the *mājarā-ye qassābeh* that led to Akhavān's third imprisonment see Qahramān, 47 and 115. Ebrāhim Golestān in "Si Sāl va Bishtar bā Mehdi Akhavān" gives his own perspective on the incident and the sense of utter disillusionment that prison brought in its wake. An austere yet passionately dignified portrait of Akhavān, Golestān's text is witness to the fact that Akhavān's life and writing are profoundly, *existentially* interconnected.

[49] de Certeau 2005, 52.

language to make it singular, contingent and mortal: "chaque faute grammaticale désigne un point miraculé du corps de la langue."[50] As the relative clause is elided and its subordination revoked, the "you" merges with its attributes and thus, ultimately, with the meaning it carries for the "I": "ey dur-e 'aziz!" Yet, who is this Other? What kind of affective bond is forged in the address? A bond of love, desire and regret? Perhaps, also. But the *bāyadi peyvand* is only in part about human eros. Rather, it knows infinite shades of anger, abhorrence, fear, disenchantment, pleading dependency, tenderness, joyous anticipation, transport, doubt, resigned pride and silence, the ultimate bond. All these have their own truth as ways of relation to an alterity: a non-I, irreducible and memorial of an ethics. Called upon – interpellated – as an Other, the mourned love of DARIGH is not *essentially* different from the diabolical "you" of the basilisk in MĀR-E QAHQAHEH ("ey darunat koshteh mā rā-o borunat koshteh bā āvāzeh 'ālam rā!"), the *Hörstdu* of NAMĀZ ("ey hameh hasti ze to āyā to ham hasti?"), the grieving heart, dissociated from the "I" in ROWSHANI ("ey shodeh chun sang-e siāhi sabur"), the shadow – spectral *alter ego* – in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH ("ey hamchu man bar zamin uftādeh" or "bā man bemān ey to khub, ey yegāneh" and "bā man bemān ey to az khʷod gorizān"), or, ultimately, the "hey, folāni!" of *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist*. In Akhavān's addresses an unstable, precarious union is enacted that no longer *expresses* but becomes itself the living token of a relation, embodied in the dandelion seed, minuscule, airborne messenger, of QĀSEDAK (1338, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*):[51]

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[50] de Certeau 1982, 203.

[51] In Persian, the seeds of the matured dandelion flower – or "blowball" – are called *qāsedak*, which literally means "little messenger." As Akhavān explains in a note at the end of QĀSEDAK, the people of Mashhad believe that dandelion seeds bring news from unknown places or distant travellers. The little parachutes are then, in turn, entrusted with messages to carry and let fly again.

قاصدک ! هان، ولی ... آخر ... ایوای !
راستی آیا رفتی با باد ؟
با توام، آی ! کجا رفتی ؟ آی .. !
[...]
قاصدک !
ابرهای همه عالم شب و روز
در دلم میگریند.

dandelion! lo, but … then … woe!
tell me, are you gone with the wind?
it's you I mean, oh! where are you gone? oh.. !
[…]
dandelion!
all the world's clouds day and night
weep in my heart.

The Other is a wound – the wound of an impossibility – inflicted on language, as in JARĀHAT (1337, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*). Derrida speaks of "cette écriture blessée qui porte les stigmates de sa propre inadéquation"[52] and de Certeau writes that the mystical excess, "la blessure et l'ouverture du sens […] ne sont pas identifiable à la structure historique d'où dépendent leur forme et leur possibilité même."[53] The paradox here is of different, absolutely heterogeneous ontological orders: of a word become receptive to an outside whose name may be God, the beloved, the Other, or a poetic meaning that transcends what is utterable in language at a certain moment in time. Yet side by side with this word that proceeds in leaps and is estranged to itself there always exists another language, a language that stays within the bounds prescribed by historical logic, however much these bounds are exhausted and strained to their utmost potential. The stupendous virtuosity or, more properly, complexity, of Akhavān's narrative poems can still be understood as part of a millennial literary tradition, even though numerous

[52] Derrida 2006, 66. Derrida's *Sauf le nom*, circling around passages from the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* by Angelus Silesius, is among the most lucid meditations on the nature of apophatic discourse.

[53] de Certeau 2005, 336. It seems to me that de Certeau's conception of the mystical excess corresponds to the meaning of *shath.*

images and metaphors in CHĀVUSHI ("chun kerm-e nimeh-jāni bi sar-o bi dom / ke az dehliz-e naqb-āsā-ye rag-hāyam / keshānad khʷishtan rā"), QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN ("chu ruh-e joghd gardān dar mazār-ājin-e in shab-hāye bi sāhel"), MARD-O MARKAB ("v-ān kos-e gandom foru balʿideshān yekjāy, sar tā som") or ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR ("dar khʷ āb-hāye man, / in āb-hāye ahli-ye vahshat / tā chashm binad kārvān-e howl-o hazyān ast") go radically beyond any precedent.[54] Poems like GHAZAL 3, NAMĀZ and SABZ, however, can no longer be identified let alone equated with a given historical structure. While these poems undeniably arise from the matrix of Persian literature, their figures of language and thought have ceased to make sense within the etiology of a linear continuum. Openings, strange and dehiscent, Akhavān's lyric masterpieces bear the mark of their own inadequacy: like Beethoven's late string quartets or Schubert's posthumous sonatas, they point to an *elsewhere* that cannot – yet? – be grasped.

Poems like HASTAN, CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH, GHAZAL 3 and 4, JARĀHAT, HĀLAT, NAMĀZ or SABZ tell of an experience that is forever without reach but in the poetic act becomes memory: the memory of something that may never have been, a wondrous and fleeting moment that exists without past or future.[55] NAMĀZ begins with a *thereness* that is now lost: "bāgh bud-o dareh – cheshmandāz-e por mahtāb." Yet, will we ever know if there was a garden and valley, a moonlit sight? Will we ever know if what the poem relates did indeed take place, if "ānche mididim-o mididand / bud khʷābi, ya khiāli bud" (JARĀHAT)?

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[54] On the unprecedented novelty of some compounds ("tarkibāt"), poetic expressions and figures of speech ("esteʿāreh-hā va taʿbir-hā") in Akhavān also see Shafiʿi Kadkani 1390a, 167–170.

[55] As Shafiʿi Kadkani (1390a, 157) points out, the portrayal of subjective experiences and states of mind – "tarsim-e hālāt va neshān dādan-e ehsās-hāye mojarrad-e daruni" – in poems such as HĀLAT is rare, not only in classical but also in modern Persian poetry. But what exactly happens in these poems? Are they the protocol of an interior world or an act of pure, almost intransitive seeing?

SABZ (1339, *Az in Avestā*), an ode to green, is Akhavān's most baffling and enigmatic, perhaps his most beautiful poem:

پا به پای تو که می بردی مرا با خویش،
– همچنان کز خویش و بی خویشی –
در رکاب تو که می رفتی،
همعنان با نور،
در مجلّل هودَج سرّ و سرود و هوش و حیرانی،
سوی اقصا مرزهای دور ؛
– تو قَصیل اسب بیِ آرام من، تو چتر طاووس نر مستم –
تو گرامیتر تعلّق، زُمُرّدین زنحیر زهر مهربانِ من –
پا به پای تو
تا تجرّد، تا رها رفتم.

apace with you who were taking me with you
– the same as from self and selflessness –
in the wake of you who were riding
rein-to-rein with light[56]
in the sumptuous *howdah* of mystery, song, alertness and wonder
towards the farthest boundaries;
– you, the forage of my restless horse, you, the wheel of my drunken peacock –
you, the most precious attachment, the emerald chain of my benign poison –
apace with you
I reached deliverance, reached abandon.

The poem speaks of an ecstatic experience, a memory, a debt of gratitude. What is evoked is a moment of pure consciousness in which self and non-self are both transcended and any subject that could be extinguished is already absent. The verdant ruin of the "I" in SABZ is the excess of a presence. A ruin of *shath*, brought about in a *me'rāj* whose mount is a waft of green smoke, hashish. Rather than to a heaven or Godhead the nocturnal ascension leads to an expanse on the far side of God: "tā tarāzu'i

[56] The expression is echoed later, in SHĀTEQI, ZENDĀNI-YE DOKHTAR 'AMU TĀVUS, the opening poem, and GĀHI ANDISHAM KE SHĀYAD SANG HAQQ DĀRAD, the closing poem of *Zendegi Miguyad: Ammā bāz Bāyad Zist…*, bleak and disillusioned yet glimmering with a quiet humanity:

ماجرای زندگی آیا
جز مشقّتهای شوقی توأمان با زجر،
اختیارش همعنان با جبر،
بسترش بر بعُدِ فرّار و مه آلودِ زمان لغزان،
در فضایِ کشفِ پوچِ ماجراها، چیست ؟

ke yeksān bud dar āfāq-e ʻadl-e u."[57] Unspeakable abstraction (divine justice) and illimitation (the horizons) are hemmed in by the scales of a balance, even, aligned with a meaning that remains unattainable. Throughout the poem, the utmost, deepest state of rapture is counterpoised by an extreme precision of language, of words naming and denoting, of words also that cannot be called archaic or precious, even though they are no less exorbitant than those in MIRĀS or ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH.[58] The language of SABZ moves *in unendlicher Annäherung* to a meaning that keeps eluding words: a meaning that – as it is brought to speech – has *already* receded beyond the screen of memory.[59] Yet, in the poem's images (are they images?) we grasp an imponderable presence and seem to *know* what is unconcealed by the figures of language. Or rather, the fact that we do not know loses all significance. These images in their perfect materiality are not so much surface but immanence.[60] In the same way, the inflections of green traversing the

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[57] The line is reminiscent of MARD-O MARKAB, where Akhavān likens the vastness of a space through which a road moves to the scales of a balance bisected by a fulcrum: "chun do kaffeh-y ʻadl ʻādel bud, ammā khāli oftādeh / dar do su-ye khalvat-e jāddeh."

[58] Rezā Barāhani (in Qāsemzādeh, 127) believes that the archaising lexis of MIRĀS imposes the cancerous graft of a long-dead language on modern poetry. Contrary to Barāhani, Shafiʻi Kadkani (1390a, 163) argues that Akhavān's choice of words in the poem is far from gratuitous and fulfils a precise purpose. While Barāhani's position is consistent within the framework of his own poetics, Shafiʻi Kadkani bases his argument not on literary convictions ("in mabād! ān bād!" – as in MIRĀS) but on a profound understanding of the workings of Akhavān's poetry in and of itself.

[59] In the penultimate version of the preface to *Hyperion* Friedrich Hölderlin writes: "Aber weder unser Wissen noch unser Handeln gelangt in irgend einer Periode des Daseins dahin, wo aller Widerstreit aufhört, wo Alles Eins ist; die bestimmte Linie vereiniget sich mit der unbestimmten nur in unendlicher Annäherung." Language, above all that of mystical and poetic discourse, is the infinite approximation to a meaning that cannot be captured. • Paul Celan's "Sprache, Finster-Lisene" (DU SEI WIE DU, immer) is the metaphor of language on the frontiers of an obscure meaning, beautifully translated by John Felstiner (248 and 251) as "speech, dark-selvedge": an expression that captures, as Felstiner himself notes, the senses of "self" and "edge" while also resonating with "savage" and "salvage."

[60] "L'événement reste à la fois *dans* et *sur* le langage, donc, au-dedans et à la surface, une surface ouverte, exposée, immédiatement débordée, hors d'elle-même" (Derrida 2006, 60).

poem are profoundly concrete and yet, at once, immaterial: the olive shade of peridot and the blue cast of emerald, the sheltered, foresty green of shadows, the silken verdancy of a curtain's flower field, the bright hue of young grass, the iridescent blue-green of a peacock's plumage and the saturated green of forage. Then, there are other colours (gold), textures, odours, velocities, distances and spaces that join ranks to salvage the moment from the impassive and anonymous continuum of time. Even, paradoxically, the sense of an utterance like "tā tajarrod, tā rahā raftam" seems tangible in its intangibility. As they point to a meaning that, absolutely other and absolutely outside, keeps leaving irrefutable traces on language, these words are "des expressions débordées par l'excès d'une présence jamais possédée."[61] They are the token of a lived absence, a desire: a wound inflicted on speech as the knowledge of an opening, an experience, a moment both in and outside of time. Just like the mystic so too the poet can say of whatever happened that it was *there*, "car il garde gravées en sa mémoire les moindres circonstances de cet instant."[62] Yet, will the truth of what happened ever be known or become any less alien? No, strangeness and distance are not overcome. Instead, *what* and *why* no longer matter as "chand-o chun-hā" have died into the poem and into language itself. At the end of SABZ, nothing remains but the certainty of *c'était là*, carried over to memory. No question marks, only an affirmation, renewed, of wonder:

تا کجا بردی مرا دیشب،
با تو دیشب تا کجا رفتم.

> how far away did you take me last night,
> with you last night how far did I travel.

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[61] de Certeau 2005, 330.

[62] de Certeau 2005, 331.

> Das epische dem Schein nach naïve Gedicht ist in seiner Bedeutung heroisch. Es ist die Metapher großer Bestrebungen.
>
> – Friedrich Hölderlin, "Poetologische Aufzeichnungen"

Forugh Farrokhzād is one of the few intellectuals to have grasped the significance of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH as a poem of our age. She is also one of the few never to have spoken of a nostalgic gaze or retrograde sensibility in Akhavān.[63] ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is not about a return or reconquest but an alienation: the alienation of the individual for whom community has become sclerotised into collective.[64] It is the unflinching diagnosis of a condition, expressed or, rather, *enacted* in language.[65] (Who is "we" in the poem? Brittle and shot through with time, the "we" lacks a stable, unambivalent voice.) As in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, where the appeal to a dead tradition is shown to be desperately absurd, there is no apotheosis of a mythical past in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. No halcyon days of a future are adumbrated either. What answer could be imagined to the poem's recurrent "where?" other than "har jā ke injā nist" (CHĀVUSHI)? Pharmakos for the ills of its time, the elsewhere remains without image, cast in the pure negativity of

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[63] Farrokhzād (in Qāsemzādeh, 76) writes: "dar qat'eh-ye ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH ke yeki az zibātarin qata'āt-e in ketāb [*Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*] va bi gomān yeki az qavitarin she'r-hā'i ast ke az ebtedā-ye peydāyesh-e she'r-e now tā be hāl sorudeh shodeh ast, u hamāseh-ye qarn-e mā rā misarāyad."

[64] Theodor Adorno (2003, 468) speaks of "eine Vereinzelung, die doch keine Fiktion positiver Gemeinschaft tilgt."

[65] It is paramount to distinguish between a private wistfulness and the critique of an age that is voiced in Akhavān's poems: subtle, fragile, shunning any kind of dogma while sounding a complex reality. As Akhavān would himself say, if in a different context: "farq ast, farqi fāreq" (see the preface to *Zendegi Miguyad* in *Seh Ketāb*, 123). Adorno (2003, 455; italics added) puts it unequivocally: "Daß, was der Dichter sagt, das Wirkliche sei, mag zutreffen auf den Gehalt des Gedichts, *nie auf Thesen*." (Even Ebrāhim Golestān, who is otherwise the most perceptive, incorruptible and unduped of critics, fails to make the distinction sufficiently clear.)

hichestān, absent from all maps, without properties or attributes, *bi neshān.* The *pāytakht-e qarn* exists and is real only in so far as it causes real suffering. It cannot be fought or vanquished as an abstraction, as long as we fail to comprehend that history has already and irrevocably been sedimented in the most recondite layers of our thought.

In Akhavān's epic poems – and ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is no exception – there are no heroes but an eternal *ghobār-e bi-savār*, standing in for the saviour. Even where there is a potential hero, like the prince of *shahr-e sangestān*, the drama appears to be unfolding in the scenery, run down and real, of a play that has long been disbanded. In these epics, the fact of narration itself is staged, refracted through the voice of non-human, disembodied or otherwise fickle narrators: the two doves of QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, the decoy storyteller of MARD-O MARKAB ("bar dorugh-e rāviān besyār khandidand"!), the somnambulist "I" of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, or the nocturnal vagrant of NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH, fading into his own shadow. In ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, a multiple regression of voices has a bard relay the tale to his lyre and, finally, to a "we" that speaks without being incarnate. As an itinerant pronoun, "we" – less tangible even than "I" – has no place in the epic. Placeholder not for a character but for speech itself, it creates a void at the centre of the narration: a double bind of perspective, for "we" has no distance, no body, no image, it remains fatally vague yet deathless, ineradicable, haunting, like Kafka's hunter Gracchus who is forever unable to die. In its errant atemporality, however, the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH recalls the hapless prince of stoneland as a figure of collective prostration. (Many of Akhavān's poems exist in multiple hypostases, as one motif or poetic idea passes through different keys and resonates across years and genres.)

ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH sets in with a deictic gesture, perhaps even a whiff of impatience: "in shekasteh chang-e bi qānun." The first three lines of the poem then mimic the strokes of a bard playing his lyre.[66] Yet, who is the old bard with his ashen face? While the ancient Greeks liked to imagine the seer and rhapsode as blind, the bard of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is not so much sightless as disengaged, strangely absent: a demiurge who has retreated from his creation, unmoved and unmoving. By letting the lyre speak, the *changi-ye shurideh-rang-e pir* has surrendered his tale. (He will return later, in a different guise, as the ashik of ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR.) Who then is speaking, or rather, who is narrating? The lyre is but an echo space, a *persona* through which a "we" speaks: a "we" that never *appears* while the place of the bard – there can be no other knowing, cognisant subject – remains empty. (Only towards the end of the poem, in stanzas 9 and 10, will a sober voice come to the fore.) Another origin must be found for the words that seemingly pertain to no-one. Theodor Adorno writes of Hölderlin's late poetry: "Indem die Sprache die Fäden zum Subjekt durchschneidet, redet sie für das Subjekt, das von sich aus […] nicht mehr reden kann."[67] In ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH too, we are witness to an inability to speak, to speak of one's own accord, as oneself. Neither the bard nor the lyre have words of their own. Instead, both are mouthpieces that sound

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[66] Akhavān was a keen musician who in his youth had even considered a career in classical Persian music. However, Akhavān's father was opposed to these aspirations and at one point led the young poet to see a wandering lute player in Mashhad, who – in spite of his mastery – led the life of an outcast, barely earning enough to scrape a living (an episode told in "Zendegi va She'r-e Akhavān Sāles az Zabān-o Qalam-e Khʷodash," 56–57; see also Qahramān, 24–25). Numerous photographs exist of Akhavān holding a *tār* (three-stringed fretted lute). The musical designation of poems like QOWLI DAR ABU-'ATĀ or CHE ĀVĀZ-HĀ (both *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) and the figure of the bard in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH or ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR (*Az in Avestā*) are evidence to the fact that Akhavān was keenly aware of the affinities between poetry and music. A study of how Akhavān's works evoke or follow the structures of Persian music would certainly lead to new insights.

[67] Adorno 2003, 478.

through an Other, before ultimately, language itself becomes subject and takes the floor to tell a story of loss, folly and incomprehension.

The words of the lyre are the vacuous boasting (*rajaz khʷāni*) of a competitor doomed to defeat. Or rather, the competitor has already been defeated, for in the lyre's words we hear a tale that has been told an infinite number of times before and whose ending is more than familiar: "in shekasteh chang-e bi qānun, / rām-e chang-e changi-ye shurideh-rang-e pir, / gāh gu'i khʷāb mibinad." An almost imperceptible qualification (*gāh gu'i*…) alerts us that the narration – the lyre's daydream – is neither unique nor trustworthy. The bard knows what is to come, knows the loop of delusion that recommences with each new song, knows too that the lyre's tale is outrageous and strange. As Maurice Blanchot writes: "L'epopée raconte l'action sans pareille et, inlassablement, la réitère."[68] It is this circularity without beginning or end that is staged in Akhavān's epic narratives, in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH as in NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR, KATIBEH, ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR or MARD-O MARKAB.[69] The question remains if the lyre is us. If so, then we, too, have been duped while our language has been hollowed out, made impracticable, reduced to a husk that falls short of its pledge. We do not yet know the answer. We can only know that the past invoked by the lyre is not the memory image of a lost golden age but a spectre born from a suffering mind. Moreover, we notice a split of time and consciousness inscribed in the narration: *who* perceives the lights of dawn as will o' the wisps over marshes? It cannot be the lyre, for the lyre has no sense of what is to come, it forgets the future with each end of the tale. Instead, a *different*, impossible consciousness shines through in the attribution of falsehood: a retrospective

[68] Blanchot 1969, 554.

[69] Perhaps the incompleteness of a narrative that remains permeable at its beginning and end suggests an attraction to the fragment as form that is one of the touchstones of literary modernity. (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in *L'absolu littéraire* devote an illuminating chapter to the discussion of what they call "L'exigence fragmentaire.")

consciousness that has lived defeat and remembers. There is no other sense in which the lyre's challenges and imprecations could be called "qesseh-ye ghamgin-e ghorbat." It is a voice from outside the epic fiction that speaks of sadness, a voice that is neither the lyre's nor that of the bard who watches over his tale in silence: an unfictional voice that unsettles the tale from the beginning. (The poet's? Akhavān's?) Whoever is at the source of this voice knows that sadness and exile lie in the egregious incommensurability of our stories with a time that defies reason.

The century – *saeculum* – has become an impregnable castle, while the lyre speaks from a non-place beyond the gates of an age to which it has not been and will not be admitted. Just as the lyre is impertinent to time itself so the metaphors in which the century is framed are fatally *anachronistic*.[70] The tragedy lies in the utter inadequacy of language in the face of what it has set out to capture. Language rebounds from the surface of a reality to which it cannot answer, for which it cannot account. One could say that in its essence, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is a poetically developed and extended category mistake.

قرن خون آشام،
قرن وحشتناک تر پیغام،
کاندر آن با فضله موهوم مرغ دور پروازی
چار رکن هفت اقلیم خدا را در زمانی بر میآشوبند.

the vampiric century
century of the most horrific message
in which the four pillars of God's seven climes are all at once shaken
by the phantasmal droppings of a far-flying bird.

[70] George Steiner (1998b, 353) speaks of "Zhivago as a complex *anachronism*; he is, in both senses of the word, impertinent to the time." The same could be said of Akhavān's *manqué* heroes: the prince in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, the knight and his mount in MARD-O MARKAB, the errant tavern haunter, propped on his shadow, in NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? All these figures do not touch upon, do not belong to their time: they are most profoundly impertinent, *unzeitgemäß*, in the Nietzschean sense.

The horror of technologised global destruction cannot be grasped on its own terms, it transcends the lyre's categories of understanding: rather than calling warplanes, rockets and atom bombs by their names and thus chiming into a contemporary idiom whose metaphors have become fossils, Akhavān inscribes the lyre's incomprehension on the reality it evokes. At the same time, not calling the lord of the flies by his name is a linguistic act of apotropeia, an attempt to deflect the droppings of a far-flying bird by a refusal to name: there *must* be no repetition of war, air raids, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Implacable, however, history will have returned in 1359/1980, twenty-three years after ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH was written.) In the words of the lyre, mystification even extends to the syntactic level, where the place of the subject remains vacant. Who is the agent of what is committed, who are *they*? Just like the processes set in motion, the identity of those who mastermind the century's destruction is mind-boggling and beyond rational grasp.

It is here that the Erich Kahler's diagnosis of a divided modern consciousness comes into its own: a split that, affecting the contemporary mind *from within*, brings forth a "second center of perception above the individual, human center"[71] and distances the subject from whatever experience is being lived. There is no need to evoke the suffering and devastation that proliferated in the wake of the modern psychosis. (The disaster is still taking its toll.) At the same time, however, the loss of a unified self also heightened human capacity to probe into ever more complex layers of world and mind. Modern literature is testimony to this nervously honed aesthetics. As Kahler writes, "the crucial achievement of the new exploratory techniques and new sensibility that sprang from them was the *conquest of a new reality*, a reaching into new levels of

[71] Kahler, 86.

reality."[72] The most modern, perhaps also the bleakest of Akhavān's works, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH shows the objectifying dissociation of feeling and perception more relentlessly than any other Persian poem of the 20th century. ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is the image of a sensibility that mirrors what it can no longer perceive as coherent: a *fractionized universe*. Yet, by negating all hopes in the possible conquest of a splintered and heterogeneous contemporary reality, the poem has already transcended its asymptotic ambitions.

In his clear and passionate essay on ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, Esmā'il Kho'i locates a profound sense of humiliation (*khʷār-shodegi*) at the poem's heart, felt by those who were left behind, barred from their legitimate share in the achievements of modernity: *the wretched of the earth*, if you will.[73] An affective humiliation that, according to Kho'i, is brought forth by the modern scientific worldview with its dissociative consciousness and carries within itself the potential to spawn resistance. Yet, is ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH an angry, revolutionary poem of humiliation, even in the sense of being *ghamākhashm-āgin*? Yes and no. Above all, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is a *quixotic* poem in which the faultline separating two worlds is laid bare: the anachronistic ideal of a chivalrous society – a society that may never have existed – and the fact of modern civilisation with its impassible coldness. It is a poem also whose narrative passes through a number of different stages: ethereal visions, hubris, delusion, outrage and wistful longing before reaching, ultimately, a desolate awareness of the truth. At the same time, no image or body is given to an opponent who remains pure negativity: "hichestān-e noh tu-ye farākh-e in ghobār-ālud-e bi gham." In this respect, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH recalls Beckett rather than Mayakovsky or Frantz Fanon. What is more, the lines are not drawn

[72] ibid., 151.

[73] Kho'i in Qāsemzādeh, 274–278.

between East and West, underdog and imperialist power. Akhavān is less affected let alone seduced by the trappings of Western culture than any other Iranian author of the 20th century. In his writings, there is no trace of *gharb-zadegi* that could give rise to a feeling of humiliation.[74] Rather, Akhavān knows that the split, running through Western and Eastern consciousness alike, is final and cannot be made undone. As he explains in a note at the end of MĀR-E QAHQAHEH: "gu'i khatābam bā « tow'amān »-e gharb va sharq bāshad, mesl-e hamisheh."[75]

The words of the lyre only take on their full meaning if in them, we hear the epic cadence: the resonance of something that belongs to another time.[76] Anonymous and nomadic, a "we" speaks in the lyre's song, as if hailing from a forgotten past and intoning an aboriginal tale that has long disappeared from the chronicles. There is no-one to answer the taunts and epic bragging, no adversary to be fought on equal terms. Instead, the clang of sabres, roll of war drums and whistle of arrows is met by a silence more deafening than any verbal spell. Something appears to be subtly askew. Is speech itself split or is it we who perceive the words of the lyre as double, suspended between past and future? Both. ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is about a temporal – historical – ekstasis: the foreignness of a "we" (a community, a collective?) facing the unassailable fortress of an age. At the same time, a consciousness speaks in the poem that, hubris-ridden and deluded, pitiful and suffering, both is and is not us. In its ambivalence, the "we" offers no ground for identification. Where are we, where do we belong, in what kind of age do we

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[74] The episode told by Akhavān in his letter to Hoseyn Rāzi (Qahramān, 167) may serve as a humorous and eloquent illustration of the poet's relative indifference to modern European poetry. Apparently, the only Western language whose fundamentals Akhavān had ever studied was German: a fact evidenced by the insertion of the words "das ist eine Idee" in the satirical *qasideh* DOKHTAR BE SHART-E CHĀQU (*To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram*) (see Qahramān, 51–52).

[75] Akhavān in Kākhi 1378, 629.

[76] Simin Behbahāni (in Qāsemzādeh, 204) speaks of "tanin-e khāss-e zabān-e hamāsi."

live? There is no more radical, no more acute exile than that of being rejected by time itself. Kho'i states the predicament clearly: "ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH barāye man, she'r-e panāh jostan va panāh nayāftan ast: faryād-e bi-panāhi-st."[77]

Nowhere else does Akhavān speak as insistently of and as "we":

ما
فاتحان قلعه های فخر تاریخیم،
شاهدان شهر های شوکت هر قرن.
ما
یادگار عصمت غمگین اعصاریم.
ما
راویان قصه های شاد و شیرینیم.

we
are the conquerors of history's proud castles,
witness to each century's splendid cities.
we
are memorial to the sad chastity of the ages.
we
are the tellers of joyful, sweet tales.

However, is Akhavān not at the same time suspicious of the words uttered by this obdurate "we": exposed, isolated, cut off from the sentence whose subject it is and – over the course of the poem – five times ostracised into a verse of its own? A moat of loneliness surrounds the "we" in its delusion, as if the thrownness of the itinerant pronoun were an indictment, a sentence of exile.

In an essay from 1345, Shafi'i Kadkani writes of Akhavān, "his language is the language of the poets of Khorāsān, that is, the birthplace and cradle from which the Dari

[77] Kho'i in Qāsemzādeh, 279.

language evolved."[78] Yet, Akhavān's language both is and is not that of Farrokhi, Ferdowsi and Khayyām: it is a language into which temporality has entered as the consciousness of distances, crystallised in the synchronicity of a *now*.[79] It is an estranged language also that finds no belonging in either the past or the present. Like the poem evoked by Celan in his *Meridian* speech, so ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH too is *eingedenk seiner Daten*, speaks from its own, specific moment in time.[80] This is why both praise and criticism of Akhavān fail to grasp what his language actually *does*. There is no revival or retrogression. Rather, a multiplicity of tones and registers, of historical echoes and literary allusions is refracted through the prism of a modern mind and sublated – made to converge – in the poem. Thus, what to some[81] appears as the empty, autotelic virtuosity of a poet beset by nostalgia is in fact the *mise-en-abyme* of an alienation, a dissociation of consciousness enacted in words. (To be sure, there is no denying a certain cultural skepticism in Akhavān's writings. However, ĀKHAR-E

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[78] Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 177) writes, "zabān-e u zabān-e shā'erān-e Khorāsān, ya'ni zādgāh va gāhvāreh-ye takāmol-e zabān-e dari ast: zabān-e Farrokhi va Ferdowsi va Khayyām" and then continues to say, "va az ānjā ke bā matn-hāye kohan-e fārsi va zabān-e shā'erān-e gozashteh āshnā-st kalamāt dar she'r-e u, resālat-e adā-ye mafāhim rā be khubi ta'ahhod mikonand." Shafi'i Kadkani puts matters felicitously when he speaks of a mission taken on by the words that Akhavān deploys. Each word does indeed fulfill its own mission in a poetry that accommodates countless layers of linguistic time. Significantly also, Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 165) sees the practice of embedding obsolescent words in a modern text as an attempt to revive what would otherwise fade out of history: a lifeworld encapsulated in language.

[79] Kho'i (in Qāsemzādeh, 274) puts it beautifully when he says that in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, "sokhan az konuni ast ke az gozashteh sarshār ast."

[80] Celan 3:196.

[81] Rezā Barāhani (in Qāsemzādeh, 152) notes with somewhat misguided pithiness: "Akhavān qodrat-e zabāni-ye khʷod rā chenān be rokh mikeshad ke she'r az tars pā be farār migozārad." Barāhani believes that Akhavān's language in certain poems is "mekānismi jodā az zāt-e hasti-ye she'r-e khʷod." Ultimately, these remarks reveal more about Barāhani's own understanding of poetry than about the nature of Akhavān's language.

SHĀHNĀMEH is no private lament but the diagnosis, cast in language, of a profound malaise affecting modern society.)

The extreme *measure* and *temperateness* of Akhavān's language – rather than its virtuosity – are disconcerting, all the more so as they are set off by the measurelessness of an aborted, quixotic heroism. In his short but brilliant essay on epic naïvety, Adorno writes, "die Genauigkeit des beschreibenden Wortes sucht die Unwahrheit aller Rede zu kompensieren," and continues to say that all attempts to free epic description of the shackles imposed by reflective reason is "der stets schon verzweifelte Versuch der Sprache, […], das Wirkliche rein, unverstört von der Gewalt der Ordnungen hervortreten zu lassen."[82] Language – *epic* language – here is opposed to the force of epistemological orders that unsettle the real before it can be captured in words. For Adorno, the exactitude of epic speech points to an awareness that the truth-value of language has always already been weakened by our categories of understanding. No analysis could be more pertinent to ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. Unparalleled even among the works of an infinitely attuned verbal sensorium,[83] the poem's linguistic precision approaches a point where language tips and becomes atomised into babble or onomatopeia. It is a precision also that seems to be pointless, lost on its aim, utterly futile. Yet in its very futility – its anachronism and impertinence – language in the poem *makes visible*, exposing as doomed the struggle to approach a reality that remains cruelly elusive. In other words, by the anachronism of its cross-grained language ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH shows a reality that cannot be named.

However, not all of the poem's cadences are anachronistic, not all turns of phrase hail back to a time beyond living memory, at least not exclusively. Resonances of

[82] Adorno 2003, 37.

[83] For an anecdotal illustration see "Akhavān va Hendeseh-ye Zabān" in Shafiʿi Kadkani 1390a, 50–51.

modern poetry and inflections of contemporary speech are woven into the poem's chorus of voices. Thus, the colloquialism of the question, repeated four times, "hān, kojā-st?" gives the speaking "we" away as anchored in our time, not the lofty age of the heroes.[84] The question is doubly – and *deliberately* – jarring, for its violation of both metre and epic tone: Akhavān could easily have avoided the metrical defect by choosing to say "hān kojā bāshad?"[85]

بر بکشتی های خشم بادبان از خون،
ما، برای فتح سوی پایتخت قرن میآییم.
تا که هیچستان نه توی فراخ این غبار آلود بیغم را
با چکاچاک مهیب تیغهامان، تیز
غرّش زهره درانِ کوسهامان، سهم
پرّش خارا شکافَ تیرهامان، تند ؛
نیک بگشاییم.

on ships of wrath their sails from blood,
we are bound for the century's capital.
to vanquish
the vast nine-layered nowhere of these impassive badlands
with the fierce clang of our swords, sharp
the gut-wrenching roar of our drums, dread
the rock-splitting flight of our arrows, swift.

The position of *tiz*, *sahm*, and *tond* at the end of these lines is a distinctly modern, Nimaean echo in the poem's many-voiced texture.[86] It lends an indetermination, a floating quality to the words, suspended between adjective and adverb: the meaning of

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[84] In a well-known passage, Forugh Farrokhzād (in Qāsemzādeh, 82) writes: "kalamāt-e zendegi-ye emruz vaghti dar she'r-e u, dar kenār-e kalamāt-e sangin va maghrur-e gozashteh mineshinand; nāgehān taghyir-e māhiyat midehand va qad mikeshand va dar yek dasti-ye she'r, ekhtelāf-hā farāmush mishavad." The dialogic nature of Akhavān's language is beautifully described here. By way of a minor quibble, however, I would argue that the differences are not so much *forgotten* as *sublated*, in the Hegelian sense of the word. (If differences of time and register were no longer perceived as such, they would lose their power to signify.)

[85] Qahramān, 57.

[86] Segregating the attribute from the noun it describes is a peculiarity (or *bed'at*) of Nimā's poetry. Akhavān employs this Nimaean effect rarely and with discretion. (See Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 169.)

tiz, *sahm*, and *tond* appears to radiate beyond the grammatical conjunction of attribute and noun. The displacement of words within the sentence exposes a certain arbitrariness of the syntactic mechanism and thereby draws attention to language itself as the raw material of poetry. At the same time, the subtle interruptions of syntax create the sensuous immediacy – the unsettling, quasi corporeal presence – of *harte Fügung* that keeps recurring in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, more so even than in MIRĀS or the other epic narratives. A rugged contrariousness of language here correlates to the excess of the heroic gesture itself. On the phonetic level, Akhavān's syncopations – "sekteh-hāye « malih »-e sabk-e khorāsāni"[87] – lend a distinct grain to these poems, an *effet du réel* of epic, as it were. However, the syntactic shifts also achieve something different, graver perhaps than atmospheric condensation. Peter Szondi in his brilliant analysis of Hölderlin's poetics writes: "Ähnlich wird die syntaktische Ganzheit, seine überlieferte Hierarchie, durch « harte Fügung » gesprengt, dem einzelnen Wort, als dem individuellen, sein Gewicht, seine Freiheit bewahrt."[88] By extrapolating from syntax to world, "Philosophisches und Philologisches […] in ihrer Verschlungenheit reflektierend," Szondi shows how the structural aspects of poetry carry meaning beyond the enclosure circumscribed by the text. In ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, too, syntactic structures are semantically charged while individual words are entrusted with a

[87] Shafi'i Kadkani 1390a, 171.

[88] Szondi 1970, 156.

signification that transcends that of the phrase: a transcendence not unlike a condemnation, as the weight of freedom bears down on each word.[89]

قصه های آسمان پاک.
نور جاری، آب.
سرد تاری، خاک.

tales of pure skies.
flowing light, water.
dusky cold, soil.

The full stop at the end of these verses is not a grammatical or syntactic sign but, quasi musical notation, marks a pause: it blurs rather than clarifies syntactic affiliations, unhinging parts of the sentence to create a state of abeyance. Meanwhile, the absence of any finite verb sidelines the scene from the narrative flow and, for the blink of an eye, stalls progression. The most epic of Akhavān's poems thus harbours a lyric moment that resounds with an air of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH. A play with time and perception, existence and nothingness also recalls the earlier work. In the syntactic order by which phenomena are presented, the *state* of a certain manner of being (*nur-e jāri*, *sard-e tāri*) precedes the actual being or object (*āb*, *khāk*) that is then named by the poem.[90] In this way, humanity is already inscribed in what Akhavān brings to language, for only a human mind can perceive the elements not by their name but their essence: water as flowing light or the earthy soil as dark cold. At the same time – and by a subliminal

[89] In the Persian context it is interesting and possibly significant that Nimā's practice of *harte Fügung* was met with a measure of guarded incomprehension. Perceived as opposed to the nature of language and, in particular, poetic language with its ideal of melodious smoothness, the displacement of syntactic structures in Nimā's poetry was soon dismissed as a linguistic deficiency without much sense or significance. Contrary to received opinion, however, Nimā's syntactic particularities are no mere poetic whim or symptom of ineptitude but an attempt to break deeply ingrained habits of seeing.

[90] "Comme si l'existant n'apparaissait que dans une existence qui le précède, comme si l'existence était indépendante de l'existant et que l'existant qui s'y trouve jeté pouvait jamais devenir maître de l'existence." (Levinas 2011, 25). • Only in one other poem, SHAKIBĀ'I-O FARYĀD (1357, *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*) does Akhavān in the same way give quasi-autonomy to attributes, creating an odd effect of provisional being.

phonetic gesture – language merges the abstract, incorporeal idea of history (*tārikh*) with the elements, bringing *tārikh* close to the earth itself (…*tāri, kh*…), close to something also that lies beneath, *beyond* even the threshold of consciousness.[91] It is in the *sard-e tāri, khāk* – not in the proud fortresses of *hichestān* – that history for Akhavān abides. Elsewhere, in MIRĀS, the materiality of a tangible, owned, human history is embodied in the image of *pustini kohneh*, handed down in time: a *quiet* history that is absent from the chronicles of the powerful, pushed to the margins even of language itself.

ور زمین - گهواره فرسوده آفاق -
دست نرم سبزه هایش را به پیش آرد،
تا که سنگ از ما نهان دارد،
چهره اش را ژرف بشخاییم.

and if the earth – rickety cradle of the horizons –
extends the soft hand of her green
to hide the rocks from us
let us claw deep furrows in her face.

Perhaps nowhere else can we find a more graphic refutation of the belief that Akhavān's poetry is at once underpinned and sapped by a yearning for the bygone days of national glory: a glory that is as fraudulent as the Shah's self-presentation lambasted in MARD-O MARKAB. No naïve idealism can be ascribed to a poet who renders his characters' delirium of grandeur in all its barbarity. The "we" that has set out to conquer the *qarn-e sheklak-chehr* has no regard for the earth either: modernity has already brought forth a profound and indelible contempt for the *gahvāreh-ye farsudeh-ye āfāq*, protectively

[91] As de Certeau (1982, 408) writes of a poem by Catherine Pozzi: "Des jeux plus intimes ou plus accidentels, […] , se cachent dans le effets musicaux du poème, c'est-à-dire en ce qui est audible mais non lisible."

tending her hand.[92] Yet, does the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH betray a modern consciousness? The poem's itinerant pronoun cannot be moored in time: it appears to traverse the ages rather than belong to either past or present. Eluding bias, the verses are testimony to an awareness that innocence has long been lost, buried in time immemorial. A senseless will to cruelty exists on both sides of our *now*, indiscriminately.

[…]
قصه های دست گرم دوست در شبهای سرد شهر.

tales of a friend's warm hand in the city's cold nights.

This is the only line in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH that does not speak *as*, does not carry within it a foreign cadence, is not *doubled in time*, as it were. Its quiet resignation also makes it the most poignant of the entire poem: the warm hand of a friend in the city's cold nights has entered the realm of stories and fiction. Also, bared of its epic trappings, the city here sounds in another, decidedly modern key: it no longer means an *elsewhere* that is exterior to our lives, an objectified space to be pacified by the erstwhile oppressed. Instead, the city is where the absence of a quiet humanity – a *possible*, non-utopian warmth – is most keenly felt. (In GHAZAL 3 the urban space returns with the same unrelieved austerity.) The very fact that neutral, quasi toneless words are embedded in a narrative that strains to uphold the epic gesture suggests a structural crack. In its simplicity and – imaginary, but all the more potent – *unliteralness* the phrase marks a moment of poised inaction: a breathturn between delusions of victory over an

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[92] Is it the same extended hand that in ZEMESTĀN (1334, Zemestān*)* is met with reluctance and distrust? (ZEMESTĀN is what remains of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH after the curtain has fallen and the storyteller departed to leave us with the bleakness of our *now*.)

وگر دست محبت سوی کس یازی،
به اکراه آورد دست از بغل بیرون ؛
که سرما سخت سوزان است.

invincible, protean and placeless enemy and the shattering cognisance of reality in its immutable strangeness.

Perhaps also the words – tales and narratives – themselves are speaking in the "we" that migrates through the poem, as the infinite recursion of a helical structure whose twin strands are language and life?

ما
کاروان ساغر و چنگیم.
لولیان چنگمان افسانه گوی زندگیمان، زندگیمان شعر و افسانه.
ساقیان مست مستانه.

we
are the procession of goblets and lyres.
gypsies, our lyres the fabulists of our lives, our lives yarn and myth.
drunken, rapt sakis.

At a point where the delirium of the speaking "we" has reached a deadlock of circular sameness, the poem tips and the lyre's tale is interrupted.

ای پریشانگوی مسکین ! پرده دیگر کن.
پور دستان جان ز چاه نا برادر در نخواهد برد.
مرد، مرد، او مرد.

oh you wretched delirious fool! strike a different chord.
the son of Dastān will not survive the stepbrother's trap.
he's dead, dead, dead.

As the narrative enters a different *modus* the hero's deathlessness is undermined and ultimately revoked by a verb that has no place in the epic. There is no other past tense, no other *past* even that occurs in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. In defiance of its abnormal presence in a poem whose temporality is a *now* tending towards an impossible future – a future that is forever without reach – the perfect of *mord* is repeated three times, as if repetition could make the reality of its impossible meaning undone.[93] Rostam *cannot* die, precisely because he is an epic hero: he is condemned to live, to continue living, in

[93] I am referring here to the perfect *aspect* of the Persian preterite.

the limbo space of legend, unable to touch reality.[94] His fate is the cruel in-between, the interregnum of an existence in words, there for the duration of a song that keeps being sounded yet never takes root, never actually comes into being and lives: "Le héros nait quand le chanteur s'avance dans la grande salle. Il se raconte. Il n'est pas, il se chante seulement."[95]

The tense generally regarded as constitutive of the narrative genre is absent from ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH: what Käte Hamburger calls the *epic preterite*, a tense that in French would correspond to the *passé simple* and in Persian to the simple past in its perfective (rather than immediate or perfect) aspect.[96] Quarantined behind an unnegotiable border, the epic preterite creates an abeyance in (time-)space, consigning whatever is narrated to the vague sprawl of a past whose relation to the present remains undetermined. While no past is enacted in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, it could be said that an *implied preterite* subtends the lyre's daydream of lost splendour: a preterite that is never voiced but merely suggested in the participles of the lyre's vision. (Participles of

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[94] The suspended temporality is mirrored in the limbo of an erratic *saeculum* that has transgressed its orbit:

قرن شکلک چهر
بر گذشته از مدار ما،
لیک بس دور از قرار مهر.

[95] Blanchot 1969, 544. It is the same existence that Meister Eckhart understood "comme advenant sans cesse à l'étant où cependant il ne prend pas racine" (Reiner Schürmann, *Maître Eckhart ou la joie errante*, Paris: Édition Payot & Rivages, 2005).

[96] Hamburger's study of the narrative – epic – as *genre* is remarkable because the author develops her analysis departing from the aspect of tenses and the ways in which epic (narrative), drama and lyric configure different temporal relations. Hamburger writes: "Es ist im Satze, in der Rede das Verb, das über die ‹ Seinsweise › von Personen und Dingen entscheidet, ihren Ort in der Zeit und damit in der Wirklichkeit angibt, über ihr Sein und Nichtsein, ihr Noch-, Nichtmehr-, und Nochnichtsein aussagt" (Hamburger, 59;). • Benveniste (1966, 237–250) would describe the temporal configuration of texts in terms of *histoire* or *récit historique* vs. *discours*. (Published in 1957, the first edition of Hamburger's *Logik der Dichtung* precedes Benveniste's work on the relations of tense as constituting different genres of speech.) After Benveniste, the three volumes of Ricœur's magisterial *Temps et récit* (1983–1991) offer an exhaustive study of narrative configurations.

a past, a present, a future?) A preterite also that implies not finality but repetition, for whatever comes to pass in the poem does not equal a unique instant but happens, invariably, "az bār-hā yek bār" (ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR).

Time throughout the poem is left afloat: no verb relegates the narrative to an imaginary past. What is stated is either the observation of a continuous present (*mibinad, misarāyad*; *mikuband*, *miruyand*, etc.) or an exhortation ("didbānān rā begu tā khʷāb nafribad!"). Only the perfect of *mord, mord, u mord* shatters the epic fiction – or fiction of epic – by forging a concrete and vital connection to the *now* of the enunciation: Rostam has died, died not in his tale but in relation to us and our time. With his death, the epic cycle is brought to a halt and the narrative itself becomes porous: the fact of Rostam's death means a breach of the fourth wall, in the same way as the irruption of an "I" from outside the space of the poem in MARD-O MARKAB or NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? and the death of a knight in the chess game of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR point to a reality beyond fiction. The force of narrative as a genre lies here: in its power to set up a *vraie semblance* (Lacoue-Labarthe) and then expose the construction as sham. In lyric poetry, by contrast, there is no "fiction of fiction," no dialectics to be enacted between figment and reality, no lies and deceptions to be exposed. (Perhaps this is another reason why the number of Akhavān's lyric poems is so small: the form does not lend itself to the ironies of metafictional play. Unmasking the fallacies of modern life had greater urgency for Akhavān than the search for a new lyric expression.)[97]

[97] In this connection, the question Akhavān raises with regard to the poetry of Sohrāb Sepehri is illuminating: "hamin SEDĀ-YE PĀ-YE ĀB ke be rāsti nāmi zibā-st, dar zamāneh'i ke ghorresh-e mahib-o bonyān-kan va virān-gar-e tufān-hā-o seyl-hā va cheh-o cheh-hā, in chenin zir-o zebar-konandeh va bar-andāzandeh-ye pir-o saghir-o zan-o mard-e 'ālam ast […] tavajjoh kardan be sedā-ye latif va nāzokāneh-ye āb, āyā khʷod rā […] be ān dar zadan (nagu'im fariftan) nist?" (*Harim-e Sāyeh-hāye Sabz* 2:126–127).

Whose voice is it that speaks in the final two stanzas? Is it the voice of Rostam, whose lament rises from the bottom of the pit where he keeps dying a painful death without ever passing beyond the threshold of life? Yet, *can* Ferdowsi's hero speak outside his tale to acknowledge defeat and the pointlessness of all labours, all aspirations? Can the hero's blades become rusty, the fletch of his arrow be torn and the drums of war roll nevermore? For this, the epic existences would have to step out of their tale and, entering human time, become mortal.

As the end of the poem approaches, we become witness to a paradoxical imbrication of epic and human – historical – time, where the forgotten tales can be told once again, as stories of absence. The idyllic tableau of a luminous and just age has faded from memory and nothing endures but a vague sense of loss, an unnameable pain.[98] However, the toneless voice, faltering, on the verge of silence is more eloquent than any bragging and intimidations of a shadowy foe. And, perhaps only this silence has the power to enter history, as a consciousness of what is gone: of exile.

ما
فاتحان شهر های رفته بر بادیم.
با صدائی نا توانتر زانکه بیرون آید از سینه،
راویان قصه های رفته از یادیم.

we
are the conquerors of wasted cities
with a voice too weak to emerge from the chest,
we are the tellers of forgotten tales.

Gradually the (im)possibility of telling the tale of the *other*, historical Rostam is revealed: not of Rostam the epic hero but of Rostam Farrokhzād, the Sassanian general

[98] Adorno (2003, 487) speaks of "die Erfahrung von der Unrestituierbarkeit jenes Verlorenen, das erst als Verlorenes mit der Aura absoluten Sinnes sich bekleidet."

who had tried to halt the incursion of Arab troops in Iran.[99] (The name of Rostam here serves as a pivot allowing legend and history to be confounded in a single abysmal voice.) Both Rostams were killed innocently, iniquitously even, both were battling forces that could not be vanquished, in a struggle that was doomed from the outset. However, there is a decisive difference between the death, iterable *ad infinitum*, of the epic hero in his tale – "cette mort sans traces" – and the singularity of the instance of death in life. The hero is extinguished into his tale only to be resurrected again later, same but other, at the will of the rhapsode. His deeds leave a sense of wonder but fail to transcend the frame of the story. Blanchot speaks of "une action merveilleuse qui s'inscrit dans la légende mais ne s'inscrit pas dans l'histoire."[100] The mechanism that renders the epic hero inoperative to the outside also underlies our dreams: oneiric time and the mythical time of epic obey the same laws. Just as the dreaming "I" of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR is locked into a glass cage of nightmarish visions, so, too, the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is powerless to intercede with reality.

In the final lines of the poem, the orders of fiction and historical fact are subverted: while Rostam, the epic hero, has died an impossible, *counternatural* death, the historical figure of Decius, the Roman emperor, has revealed himself deathless, *bi*

[99] Does the reference to Rostam Farrokhzād make Akhavān an Iranian nationalist? I believe not, for the name here has a different, more complex significance. It belongs to a dialectics that pits oppressor against oppressed in a search for historical justice, and, ultimately, the possibility of history. In this way, Rostam Farrokhzād, whose campaign never held a prospect of victory, opposes Decius, a cipher of tyrannical injustice. Akhavān's sympathies are with those whose voice is disappearing from the chronicles of memory. • Like Hölderlin, Akhavān has at times been coopted to a certain pan-Iranism, while his perceived national leanings are generously overlooked by others. However, I believe that both cooption and condonement rest on a superficial grasp of Akhavān's poetry. Pertinent in this context is Shafi'i Kadkani's essay "Jāme'eh-Shenāsi-ye do Shā'er: Shāmlu va Akhavān" in *Hālāt-o Maqāmāt-e M. Omid*. According to Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 233), "jāzebeh-ye she'r-e Akhavān barāye shiftegānash az 'eshq be sonnat va melliyat-e irāni sarcheshmeh migirad va jāzebeh-ye she'r-e Shāmlu barāye dust-dārānash hāsel-e gorizi ast ke az kohnegi dārand."

[100] Blanchot 1369, 554–555.

marg. There is no redemption, only a dream that has been turned inside out. The nightmare engulfing the Seven Sleepers has no limit or end.

گاهگه بیدار میخواهیم شد زین خواب جادوئی

at times we strain to awake from the spell of this dream

Reality is but an ill-fated dream to which the "we" awakes from a sleep of many centuries. Yet, who are the sleepers: the sufferers of a sleep that has failed to dispel history? Moving across time, on a trajectory that recalls the metamorphoses of *Orlando*, the itinerant pronoun of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is the locus of an errancy. Through the "we" a number of characters speak without ever merging or taking root in the pronoun: the voices of Rostam Dastān, the epic hero, and of Rostam Farrokhzād, the quixotic general; the voice of the Seven Sleepers; that of the lyre, also, as the *persona* through which the "we" sounds; perhaps even the voice of the bard, absent and distant; Akhavān's voice and ours. To the flux of speakers corresponds an instability of ontological spaces. As in ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, where oneiric visions trespass beyond the dream to enter life ("bā pir-dokhti zardgun gisu ke besyāri, / shekl-o shebāhat bā zanam mibord gharq-e 'arseh-ye shatranj budam man."), so in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, too, the orders are profoundly unsettled while the mind is trapped in a state of lucid inoperativeness, capable only of language. The absence of an unequivocal voice compounds the sense of discomfort and contingency. However, the poem's "we" may, ultimately, correspond to a source: it is our own double. *We* are the Seven Sleepers and, as such, have entered a space of myth that bears an uncanny resemblance to reality. Unable to change the lyre's tale yet at the same time aware of its every turn, we are doomed to keep listening. Doomed also to keep waking up and grasp what the lyre shows us – the mirror image of our own distorted perception – in the crude light of reason. We cannot hope ever to touch or even affect reality, for the categories of

existence, of origin and artifice, have been changed. The monstrous truth of our dreams has become a simulacrum of history, inescapable and sempiternal:

[...]
چشم میمالیم و میگوئیم : آنک، طرفه قصر زرنگار صبح شیرینکار.
لیک بی مرگ ست دقیانوس.
وای، وای، افسوس. »

we rub our eyes and say: there it is, the wonder of a miraculous dawn's
gilded castle.
yet Decius is immortal.
woe, woe, alas. »

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APPENDIX
LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Literature

A student of Akhavān's work is initially faced with the problem of divergent editions. Akhavān rarely changed the text of a poem once published (an example would be the *qasideh* NEZĀM-E DAHR 1327/1335 in *Arghanun*) and even before publication, alterations were usually minor. Some textual alterations, at times effected without Akhavān's knowledge, are described by Mohammad Qahramān (55–61). Beyond the natural evolution of a text, however, another factor accounts for the difference between the respective original editions and later imprints: censorship. Imposed cuts and restrictions have above all affected the poems MORDĀB II (*Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh*), SABZ (*Az in Avestā*), and ĀY MĀR-E QAHQAHEH (included in *Bāgh-e bi-Bargi* and *Sar-e Kuh-e Boland*; Akhavān writes in a footnote that the poem must have been composed between 1332 and the early 1340s). In the case of NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR / KĀVEH YĀ ESKANDAR (as the poem is called in *Bāgh-e bi-Bargi* and *Sar-e Kuh-e Boland*) Akhavān himself changed the title and there was no external pressure involved. That said, the shift from Kāveh to Nāder appears uncharacteristic as it suppresses a symbol of courageous resistance to despotism for one of military and imperialist prowess.

The original 1330 edition of *Arghanun* bears little resemblance to later, revised versions. For the second edition, published between 1345 and 1348, Akhavān penned an extensive afterword of about twenty-five pages. He also expanded the book by nearly fifty new poems (*ghazal*, *qasideh*, *qat'eh*, *robā'i*, *masnavi*, *tarkib-band* and *ekhvāniyāt* or,

perhaps, *akhavāniyāt*) written between 1331 and 1346 in the classical form. So, for instance, Akhavān included the *qasideh* TASALLĀ-O SALĀM, composed in 1335 and dedicated to "Pir Mohammad Ahmad Ābādi" ("ke khʷod-e Mosaddeq bud" as he says in *Sedā-ye Heyrat-e Bidār*, 335). The *ghazal* RĀSTI, EY VĀY, ĀYĀ… (1340), first published in *Az in Avestā*, was also made part of *Arghanun* but continues to be reproduced in current editions of *Az in Avestā.*

The first and second editions of *Zemestān* (1335 and 1346), separated by a gap of eleven years, differ substantially regarding the number and order of poems: the first two editions comprise 54 and 39 poems respectively, with BĀGH-E MAN closing the cycle. The third edition largely follows the second but includes a final work, MANZUMEH-YE SHEKĀR, drafted in 1335 and completed in 1345. (SHEKĀR was published separately in 1345, before being appended to *Zemestān*.)

The first edition of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (1338) diverges from later imprints on three counts. The poems SHAKIBĀ'I-O FARYĀD (1357) and MĀ, MAN, MĀ (1369) were included in the collection by Akhavān himself. One poem, MORDĀB II, was eliminated by the censors, presumably because of its erotic imagery. The poem is not contained in any subsequent edition or anthology and must be sought out in the original imprint. Interestingly, Forugh Farrokhzād mentions MORDĀB as a *qasideh* in her review of *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* (in Qāsemzādeh, 80–81).

In the case of *Az in Avestā* (1344), the harm done by censorship is far greater, as one of Akhavān's most astonishing masterpieces, SABZ, was expunged. Neither politically nor erotically charged, SABZ can only be considered offensive as an ode to hashish and its psychedelic effects. Fortunately, the poem has recently been reprinted in the commemorative volume *Bāgh-e bi-Bargi* (1370) and the anthology *Sar-e Kuh-e*

Boland (1375). The poem HASTAN (originally *Zemestān*) was inserted in *Az in Avestā* by the poet himself.

The reprint by Zemestān press of most of Akhavān's critical writings (*Harim-e Sāyeh-hāye Sabz*, *Bed'at-hā va Badāye'-e Nimā Yushij* and *'Atā va Leqā-ye Nimā Yushij*) was supervised by Mortezā Kākhi, with the exception of *Naqizeh va Naqizeh-Sāzān*, which was edited by Valiollāh Dorudiān.

A number of Akhavān's critical essays appeared in 1350 under the title *Maqālāt* but Akhavān himself saw the need for a more reliable edition. In 1373, all essays were published in two volumes by Zemestān as *Harim-e Sāyeh-hāye Sabz*. According Mortezā Kākhi (in the preface to volume two, 9), a third volume is projected but no date of publication has yet been scheduled.

The efforts of, above all, Mortezā Kākhi in conjunction with Zardosht Akhavān at the head of Zemestān press cannot be valued highly enough. From 1370 onwards, all poetry cycles, prose texts and critical writings (specifically, the two volumes on Nimā) published during Akhavān's lifetime were re-edited. Besides, several manuscripts, including *Manzumeh-ye Boland-e Savāheli va Khuziyāt* and the writings on parody in Persian literature (*Naqizeh va Naqizeh-Sāzān*), were published posthumously. Furthermore, the essays (*Harim-e Sāyeh-hāye Sabz*) were collected in two volumes and *Sar-e Kuh-e Boland* was established as an authoritative anthology of Akhavān's poetry.

There are several unpublished manuscripts that may, after careful editing work, be suited for publication, in particular a large convolute of notes and thoughts on the poetry of Hāfez. In addition to the posthumous manuscripts, it would be elucidating to catalogue the holdings of Akhavān's library. Akhavān had a habit of leaving detailed comments on the margins of the works he studied. An archaeology of these comments

would yield unique insights into the poet's intellectual laboratory and his approach to the classics. However, the most important project to be undertaken remains the establishment of an annotated critical edition of Akhavān's poems. It may be possible to date and reconstruct the genesis of many poems on the basis of autographs and archival evidence. Ideally, the scholarly detective work here would be advanced by conversations with those of Akhavān's contemporaries who are still alive and can be approached for testimony. Besides, it would be desirable and timely if the philological research undertaken in connection with the establishment of a critical edition also laid the groundwork for a biography of the poet. Akhavān was witness to one of the most extraordinary and fertile periods in Persian literary history: a janus-faced period that was characterised by a revaluation of the past and a bold exploration of still untapped possibilities. A biography would not only trace the course of an individual life and the evolution of a poetic talent but also capture an epoch become text. For reasons of censorship, both projects – critical edition and biography – would have to be realised through a publishing house that is not subject to governmental restrictions.

Secondary Literature

Among the wealth of secondary literature on Akhavān four volumes are indispensable reading.

I. Mohammad Rezā Shafi'i Kadkani's invaluable *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid* of 1390 is the most recent publication on Akhavān. The book is divided into two parts: personal memories of Akhavān noted down within days of the poet's death, and a collection of scholarly articles and essays.

It has been remarked that the designation of *hālāt va maqāmāt* is usually reserved for the lives of saints and that Shafi‘i Kadkani’s book constitutes a kind of blindly devotional hagiography. Such an accusation is unjustified as it fails to grasp the semantic resonances of the title. In mediaeval Arabic, Persian and Hebrew literature, *maqāmāt* denotes a genre in which rhymed prose passages are interspersed with poetry. There is no narrative arc but instead a succession of episodes, loosely strung together and following the adventures of a picaresque anti-hero. What the title *Hālāt va Maqāmāt* evokes is therefore something quite unlike either hagiography or scholarly investigation. Shafi‘i Kadkani casts Akhavān in the role of a Don Quixote, both anarchic hero and improbable saint, anachronistic knight-errant and necessary mirror to an age that has lost all faith and values. At the same time, Shafi‘i Kadkani averts the reader to the book's episodic structure: a structure that refuses to reach a final conclusion or reduce the complexity of a writing life to a single aspect, a single perspective, perhaps even a single meaning.

The first part of the book, roughly one hundred pages entitled *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid*, is made up of Shafi‘i Kadkani’s personal memories of Akhavān, composed in the form of a letter to the poet Hushang Ebtehāj (Sāyeh). Shafi‘i Kadkani here lays no claim to dispassionate scholarship. The second part of the book, accounting for some 140 pages, is a collection of Shafi‘i Kadkani’s scattered essays on Akhavān's poetry. Published in various journals over the course of three decades, the earliest essays date from 1342, 1345 and 1347 while the later ones were written after a gap of twenty years, in the wake of Akhavān's death. (All essays can also be found in *Nāgah Ghorub-e Kodāmin Setāreh.*) Finally, at the end of *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid* and quasi an

afterthought to the preceding pages, there is a reprint of the examination questions set by Akhavān as a guest lecturer in modern Persian literature at Tehran University shortly after the Islamic Revolution. What is remarkable about these questions is that they show a highly unorthodox approach to the study of poetry. Not having gone through the academic system himself, Akhavān was able to steer clear of a certain scholarly and pedagogic *doxa* that was prevalent at the time and still holds sway over faculties of Persian literature in Iran.

As Shafiʻi Kadkani himself acknowledges, the specific weight of his texts varies considerably. There is no unity of tone, not even a single aspiration, whether academic or anecdotal. Rather, what makes these essays so precious is the fact that they are testimony to a lifelong engagement – an *entretien infini* – with Akhavān as a writer and human being.

II. In *Bā Yād-hāye ʻAziz-e Gozashteh*, another recent publication (1384), Mohammad Qahramān offers precious details about life and work that cannot be found anywhere else. The introductory remarks – some seventy pages filled with reminiscences of a friendship: shared schooldays in Mashhad, Akhavān's leaving Mashhad for the capital Tehran, later encounters – are perhaps the most honest, sober and at the same time poignant account of certain episodes in Akhavān's life: his imprisonments and the death of his daughter Lāleh on 26 Shahrivar 1353. The second part of the book consists of nine letters addressed to Mohammad Qahramān, with the earliest letter dated "Tehrān – Meykhāneh-ye Tāk, (probably) 14 Shahrivar 1330" and the latest 20/4/47. (Considering the depth of the friendship between the two men, only Akhavān's avowed laziness as a correspondent may account for the small number of letters exchanged.)

Interspersed among the letters are more than a dozen poems, some of which were never published, are slightly altered in their published versions, or appear under a different name: for instance, DAR TAKĀPU-YE YEK GONĀH (1331) in *Zemestān* bears the title SEH SHAB. As part of the appendix (comprising photographs, scattered notes and the facsimile of a manuscript page adorned by an Akhavānian doodle), the book also reproduces a letter to Hoseyn Purhoseyni (Rāzi) penned on Wednesday 7 / Farvardin / 37. The letter is an example of Akhavān at his wittiest, mischievously sharp-tongued, irreverent yet never insulting height as a writer. Embedded in the letter is an early version of GHAZAL 3, still called PEYGHĀM (1336).

III. *Bāgh-e bi-Bargi. Yādnāmeh-ye Mehdi Akhavān Sāles*, edited by Mortezā Kākhi and published in 1370 to mark the first anniversary of the poet's death, presents a cornucopia of documents related to Akhavān's life and work. (In 1378, a second, slightly augmented edition was published.)

The book contains 1) a biographical timeline; 2) poems composed in memory of Akhavān by some of the most eminent poets of the time, including Manuchehr Āteshi, Simin Behbahāni, Esmā'il Kho'i, Hushang Ebtehāj (Sāyeh), Ahmad Shāmlu, Mohammad Qahramān (whose YEK MĀH BEDUN-E OMID also appears in *Nāgah Ghorub-e Kodāmin Setāreh*) and Hoseyn Monzavi; 3) close to sixty texts and essays written in homage to Akhavān by intellectuals, scholars and authors of the time, including Iraj Afshār, Simin Behbahāni, Taqi Purnāmdariān, 'Emād Khorāsāni, Simin Dāneshvar, Najaf Daryābandari, 'Abbās Zaryāb Kho'i, Shafi'i Kadkani, Sirus Tāhbāz, Mohammad Mohit Tabātabā'i, Ebrāhim Golestān, Rezā Marzbān and Mortezā Kākhi; 4) a selection of Akhavān's

poems that, importantly, is not limited to the "canonic" works composed between 1334 and 1345 but instead seeks to redress the balance of a large and varied oeuvre; 5) some of Akhavān's own essays on modern Persian writers, including Sādeq Hedāyat, Ahmad Shāmlu, H. E. Sāyeh, Forugh Farrokhzād and Sohrāb Sepehri; and, lastly, 5) a wealth of photographs, documents (identity cards, school reports, etc.) and facsimiles of manuscripts. Among the tributes to the poet – personal memories and appreciations outnumber the scholarly texts – Ebrāhim Golestān's essay stands out as the most austere yet passionately dignified portrait of Akhavān that exists.

IV. *Nāgah Ghorub-e Kodāmin Setāreh: Yādnāmeh-ye Mehdi Akhavān Sāles*, edited by Mohammad Qāsemzādeh and also published in 1370, contains essays and scholarly articles on Akhavān's poetry, conversations with the poet, personal reminiscences, poems dedicated to Akhavān (*akhavāniyeh*, in a play on words and genres mischievously coined by the poet), poems composed in mourning after Akhavān's death (*marāsi*, among others by Simin Behbahāni, 'Emād Khorāsāni, Mohammad Qahramān and Shafi'i Kadkani), and fourteen of Akhavān's most iconic poems.

While all of the material gathered in *Nāgah Ghorub-e Kodāmin Setāreh* is of interest, some of the texts may, for various reasons, be considered important. 1) Pride of place must be given to four essays by Shafi'i Kadkani, all of which – the long and comprehensive "Tahlili az She'r-e Omid" under the title of "Abri Darun-e Āyeneh Geryān" – are reprinted in *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid*. 2) Two pieces by Forugh Farrokhzād, an interview excerpt and a short review, are remarkable for the immediacy and grace of their approach, heedless of

received opinion. The review dates from 1339, the year after *Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh* was published, and laments the absence of any critical echo to Akhavān's book. The undated interview excerpt contains some highly perceptive observations on the nature of Akhavān's language. 3) Simin Behbahāni's essay "Akhavān, joz az Ranj-e Digarān Nanālid" is a distillation of what makes up Akhavān – the elements of his poetics – written by an intellectual who is also a practitioner of poetry. Behbahāni gives attention to Akhavān's supposedly minor (neo-)classical works and addresses the matter of his ostensible decline after 1345 with rare perspicacity. She also shows how profoundly the poems of *Arghanun* and *To rā ey Kohan Bum-o Bar Dust Dāram* reflect – lexically, thematically and intellectually – the historical moment, the Benjaminian *now* of their composition. Behbahāni's argument in her essay rests on an intimate familiarity with even the most obscure nooks of Akhavān's œuvre. At the same time and without lapsing into biographism, she never loses sight of the hardships that kept blighting a life: hardships that make the dignity of voice in Akhavān's poetry all the more remarkable. 4) Esmā'il Kho'i's 1347 essay on ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is, to my knowledge, the only extended analysis of a single poem by Akhavān rather than a poetry collection (e.g., Shafi'i Kadkani's article on *Az in Avestā*) or theme (Akhavān and poetic tradition, Akhavān as an interpreter of Nimā, contemporary aspects of Akhavān's poetry, etc.). While Kho'i does not offer a close reading in the hermeneutical sense, his analysis nevertheless seeks to mediate between the poem and the existential questions that are refracted in it. The essay ends with a meditation, thoughtful and acute, on the irresolvable dilemma at the origin of Akhavān's writing. 5) Lastly, two articles by Rezā Barāhani are noteworthy, if only to a certain extent for the

arguments they advance. In these essays, jibes directed at *'eddeh'i az hazarāt-e akhavāniyun* alternate with passages that aspire to the gravity of serious literary criticism. Barāhani's remarks now and again verge (deliberately?) on caricature. Between the lines, however, a lopsided but sharp intelligence flares up that shines a light on the constitutive elements of Akhavān's poetry. It is clear that Barāhani writes from the place of his own poetics and, especially in the earlier essay, sets Akhavān up as a negative foil. Barāhani travesties Akhavān's linguistic polyphony, complex narrative and his Hölderlinian consciousness of *dürftiger Zeit* as cancerous graft (*peyvand-e saratāni*), symbolically encrypted mythologising (*tamsil-sāzi*, *ostureh-sāzi*) and patriotistic hero-worship (*qahramān-parasti* and *melli-bāzi*). Yet by distorting the meaning and thrust of the elements he rightly perceives as essential, Barāhani in fact contributes more to an understanding of Akhavān than those who ground their praise of the poet on the exact same distortions.

Beside the main reference works on which any study of Akhavān needs to rest, a further title deserves to be mentioned: *Āvāz-e Chogur. Zendegi va She'r-e Mehdi Akhavān Sāles* (1380), by Mohammad Rezā Mohammadi Āmoli. Although Mohammadi Āmoli does not offer any radically new insights, *Āvāz-e Chogur* is valuable as a digest of existing scholarship. Also, the book provides an extremely helpful and near-exhaustive bibliography of secondary literature up to the mid-1370s.

Finally, the interviews collected and edited by Mortezā Kākhi in *Sedā-ye Heyrat-e Bidār. Goft-o Gu-hāye Mehdi Akhavān Sāles* (1371) should be the first port of call for Akhavān's views on contemporary literary figures as well as the old masters, his understanding of poetry, details – unexpected at times – of life and work and,

importantly, the *sha'n-e nozul* of some of his poems. Above all, however, *Sedā-ye Heyrat-e Bidār* shows Akhavān in all his intellectual and human generosity, quick-wittedness, sparkly and unconventional reasoning, at times playfully convoluted trains of thought, profound insights, but also withdrawal, grumpily protective impatience and rhetorical feints – the art of *tafreh raftan* carried to perfection – whenever a question is not to his liking. The interviews, varying in length from three to seventy pages, were conducted over the course of twenty-five years, with the earliest conversation dating from 1344, the year *Az in Avestā* was published, and the last one from the week before the poet's death on 4 Mordād 1369 (26 August 1990). Most interviews were conducted anonymously or by journalists, with the notable exception of "Didār va Shenākht-e « M. Omid »" (1347; 39–110), whose questions were posed by two poets and literary scholars: Shafi'i Kadkani and Esmā'il Kho'i alongside Sirus Tāhbāz, the editor of Nimā's collected works. In addition, the interview "Daricheh'i bar Adabiyāt-e Emruz-e Irān" (n.d.; 308–379), conducted by Mohammad Mohammad 'Ali, may also be singled out for the range and depth of the issues it covers.

General Remarks

The two extreme poles of literary criticism in Iran are description (the rendering of what a poem purportedly "says") and polemic (the championing of "good" vs. "bad" literature, of "worthy" vs. "unworthy" texts): what Maurice Blanchot calls *l'illusion normative*. Even Shafi'i Kadkani, who as a scholar has transcended personal vanity, occasionally drifts into combative judgement or, rarely, paraphrase: a fact that he himself acknowledges in the preface to *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid*, 17. Shafi'i Kadkani's digs at some poets and writers whom he perceives to be disingenuous have

given rise to scattered and muted but nevertheless persistent critical voices. In particular, his dismissal of Sohrab Sepehri's poetic method as *she'r-e jadvali* and his controversial discussion of Ahmad Shāmlu in another recent publication, *Bā Cherāgh va Āyeneh*, have stirred up rumblings of discontent.

In general, the lines between the literary and critical camps are clearly drawn. Scarce are the instances where an argument or analysis is pursued to the very end, to its final consequence. Or perhaps we should say that many insights and perceptions are merely dabbed onto the text, as allusions that are never spelt out. It seems as if a vague sense of verbal pudency or *Sprachscham* (attested by Walter Benjamin to Robert Walser) kept some scholars and writers from naming what cannot be named. A case in point is the elliptic remark Shafi'i Kadkani (1390a, 168) makes when talking about Akhavān's metaphors and tropes: "ke gu'i az yek jorm-e fiziki sokhan miguyad." Here, the author stops short before uttering a fact that is evident to those aware of the historical circumstances. There would have been no need to use the qualification "as if": poems like ĀVĀZ-E CHOGUR or HASTAN do speak of an actual, physical crime committed by a despotic regime. In Mohammad Qahramān's notes we find the same allusive writing, the same *Sprachscham*, perhaps even *Wirklichkeitsscham* and hesitation to disrobe reality to the bleak light of fact. These texts call for an unhurried receptiveness on the part of the reader as they reveal themselves only gradually. Not only the words here are significant but also the place of the speaker and his (or her: in the case of Forugh Farrokhzād and Simin Behbahāni) discretion of voice. Writers like Golestān, Behbahāni, Qahramān, Forugh or Shafi'i Kadkani in their texts shield and guard the reality of a human existence that is known to be fragile and all too easily eclipsed by the vicissitudes of politics.

Unlike Nimā, Akhavān never belonged to the number of poets who were – justly or not – maligned for technical faults in their verse. To the contrary, writers such as Rezā Barāhani have criticised what they believe to be an excessive virtuosity of language. However, the jibes of Barāhani and others do not convey insights about Akhavān but instead reveal the ideological position of the critic. As Shafiʻi Kadkani has lucidly stated in his article on the respective audiences of Shāmlu's and Akhavān's poetry, appreciation of either poet is to a considerable extent not grounded on literary criteria. Sadly, in recent years Akhavān has been widely perceived as a political reactionary, nostalgic for the glorious days of a pre-Islamic past. Even an otherwise astute critic like Esmāʻil Khoʼi lapses into a semi-apologetic tone for what he considers a naïvely misdirected worldview. (An instance would be the controversial but thought-provoking essay "M. Omid. « Shāʻer-e Shekast »?" whose title echoes Najaf Daryābandari's "Akhavān, Shāʻer-e Shekast.") Yet, both jibes and apologies are symptoms of a circular interpretation that sees in the text what it sets out to find there. Few intellectuals have been able to resist the allure of circularity: Shafiʻi Kadkani, Ebrāhim Golestān and Simin Behbahāni, above all. These three figures are among the most perspicacious critics of Akhavān because they are not affiliated with a particular ideological position. They do not seek for an affirmation of their beliefs but follow the path opened up by Akhavān's texts.

Akhavān's poetry in its innermost core does not offer the comfort of imperatives. There are no guidelines for a good life and no moral prescriptions. Rather, Akhavān leads us into a space that has not been mapped. His poetry is an injunction, a call on the reader to leave all certainties behind and embark on a journey whose sense and end are unknown. Like the third road in CHĀVUSHI,

سوی اینها و آنها نیست.
بسوی پهندشت بی خداوندسیست...

it leads neither here nor there
it leads towards a forsaken wasteland …

A wasteland of uncharted humanity.